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JESSIE'S EXPIATION.

A Novel.

BY

OSWALD BOYLE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON :

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1867.

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CONTENTS

OF

THE SECOND VOLUME.

| CHAP. | PAGE |
|------------------------------------------|------|
| I. JUSTICE ADMINISTERED | 1 |
| II. MASTER OF THE POSITION | 45 |
| III. HYDE PARK HELPS OUR STORY | 67 |
| IV. LORD RENDOVER BAITS A TRAP | 100 |
| V. WILL CARRYNGTON BE CAUGHT? | 116 |
| VI. THREE IMPORTANT INTERVIEWS | 137 |
| VII. OFFERS OF ADVANCEMENT | 176 |
| VIII. CARRYNGTON'S PERPLEXITY | 214 |
| IX. TWO HEADS BETTER THAN ONE | 225 |
| X. PLAYING HIGH | 251 |
| XI. THE UNDERHILL BALL | 271 |



JESSIE'S EXPIATION.

CHAPTER I.

JUSTICE ADMINISTERED.

THE Spring Assizes were "on," as the phrase is, in the west as in all the other parts of England, and the criminal court was, as usual, crowded to suffocation. Roger Barfoot's opinion is the common one with the mass of the people. There is no news so interesting to them as the assize news; and whenever they have the opportunity of obtaining it at first hand, they never fail to be present.

"Here he comes," said one of them, little man who seemed to have been present so often as to have become exceedingly knowing in the forms and personages of the

court. "Here he comes; this is the judge. Stand up with you."

All in court rose as his lordship entered and took his seat on the bench, and the clerk called out a long formula to which nobody attended.

"Silence in the court!"

"What comes on first, this morning, Mr. Batho?" asked his lordship, bending from his chair of state over the desk in front of him. His lordship was the most gentlemanly and kindly of men.

"Burglary, my lord. Your lordship said you would take the Fleetwood Manse case first, for the convenience of counsel."

"Ah yes! So I did; I recollect—be it so, Mr. Batho."

"That's the high sheriff," said the same man who had before vouchsafed similar information to his neighbours, by whom he was now regarded and listened to with great favour. "He's no end of a fellow; and that gentleman on the other side of the judge, and next but one to his lordship, is Mr.

Chichester Fleetwood, owner of Fleetwood Manse, where this burglary was committed."

"Which of 'em ? The man with the big brown beard and moustaches, or t'other chap with only the small dark moustache, like a furriner."

"The gentleman with the beard is Mr. Chichester Fleetwood," answered the little man, dignifiedly, as if to reprove the excessive familiarity of the inquirer, when speaking of people so much the superiors of all of them that were perched and squeezed up there. But the inquirer was a dull democrat, who did not see the reproof.

"And who's t'other chap?" he asked.

"I don't know who the gentleman with the dark moustache is, but that's Mr. Chichester Fleetwood sitting next to him. That I *do* know."

"He *may* look like a furriner," said another, "him as is next his lordship. But he's a rare fine-looking chap, all the same."

"So he is," said four or five agreeing voices, though all in a whisper. But when

three or four hundred people are talking, even though in a whisper, they make a certain amount of disturbance.

Accordingly there was again a cry of—

“Silence in the court!”

“T’other chap,” to whose good looks there was thus universal testimony, was no other than Lord Rendover, who was receiving that attention from the judge and the high sheriff to which his rank justly entitled him.

“Why aren’t you in this case, Fuddleton?” said one of the bar across the green table at which her Majesty’s Counsel learned in the law were chatting, laughing, and cutting their jokes.

“The prisoners haven’t got counsel. They’re going to defend themselves,” said another barrister, answering the question for Fuddleton, who did not deign a reply for himself.

“Then what the devil is Fuddleton doing here at all?” asked another junior in a loud voice. There is always enough war going on between certain leaders and certain

juniors for these last to consider the former as fair sport for their bold wit. "Fuddleton!" and a dirty penwiper was shied by the speaker across the table at the would-be solemn Q.C., "what on earth do you come in here for? Why don't you stick in the civil court?—can't you get anything to do on that side, and are you coming back to us?"

Fuddleton could not condescend to reply directly to the cheeky young gentleman who thus badgered him. But feeling that some explanation of his presence was necessary, considering that he was not retained in the case, he said aloud to those nearer to him—

"I was staying at Fleetwood Manse when this burglary occurred, and Lord Rendover is a great friend of mine, and I want to hear all about it. It will be very interesting."

"Fuddleton's such a swell," said another junior. "Half the Peerage are his intimate friends."

"Silence in the court!" again shouted

the clerk, adding *sotto voce* to the crowd of wigs nearer to him; "now, gentlemen, do, please, not make *quite* such a disturbance."

Whereupon another penwiper was shied at Fuddleton, and for a time there was comparative silence.

It would soon again have been broken, but that all the preliminary formulas had been gone through, and Mr. Boxall, the leading counsel for the prosecution, rose, and in a clear voice called the attention of the entire court by the magic words—

"May it please your Lordship! Gentlemen of the Jury! The two prisoners at the bar, called in the indictment William Stebins and Samuel Speke, are charged, as you have heard, with committing a burglary attended with violence in the house of Mr. Chichester Fleetwood, the owner of Fleetwood Manse, between the hours of nine and five on the night of the seventeenth day of September last. The importance of this last part of the charge, which will be fully and

satisfactorily proved before you, will be explained to you by his lordship in his summing-up. The prisoners being undefended by counsel, I do not deem it proper to open the case against them at any length."

Here his lordship showed signs of approval by gently nodding his benevolent-looking head.

"And, indeed, the case, though so serious, is at the same time so simple a one, that there is no occasion for me to occupy your time with a detailed statement of facts which will all come out with the most perfect clearness in the examination of the witnesses whom I shall call before you. These will be few, indeed only four; but they will all be material witnesses. And from their lips you will receive a narrative complete, and as appears to me, and I have not the slightest doubt, gentlemen, will appear to you, conclusive.

"And here I might conclude my opening statement, and at once proceed to call these

witnesses into court. But, before I do so, I must allude to the character of one of them, and that the most important witness in the case. Gentlemen, it is always a painful and perhaps humiliating element in a criminal case, when one of the original comrades of the accused turns what is called Queen's evidence, and appears in the witness-box against them. That painful element must needs be introduced here. There were not two, but three persons concerned in the burglary at Fleetwood Manse; and that third person was Abraham Coggett, who will be my principal witness. Into the motives of Abraham Coggett, it fortunately is no part of my duty, or of yours, to inquire. He may have been actuated by a feeling of revenge, by a sentiment of jealousy, or by a dread of discovery. With this we have nothing to do. We have only to listen to his evidence, and see if it be true.

“But, you will say, how is such a fellow to be believed? His lordship will tell you that the evidence given by an accomplice

turned informer is of so questionable and disreputable a kind that, when it is unsupported by other and better testimony, it is not worthy of much credit. But Abraham Coggett's evidence will not be unsupported. I shall call before you Lord Rendover, a nobleman of unblemished and, indeed, distinguished character, who was staying at Fleetwood Manse on the night of the burglary, and who was aroused from his sleep by the entry of the burglars into his bedroom. Lord Rendover will tell you how, on awaking, he found himself held down with exceeding violence by Samuel Speke, one of the prisoners at the bar, and by Speke's savage treatment of him reduced to a state which, from Lord Rendover's appearance, I think you will conclude is not common with him—a state of exhaustion and insensibility.”

During this part of the counsel's statement, the prisoners had been conferring together so earnestly, that the officer who had charge of them in the dock touched

them with his hand, as much as to recal to them the advisability of listening carefully to the remainder of the statement, instead of arguing together about that which had already been made. They took the hint, but ever and anon kept looking at each other as though they would like to have a good talk together and with the court generally, upon that last part of the statement, if upon no other. The counsel went on.

“Lord Rendover will swear that he saw the man distinctly, and will tell you that the man was Samuel Speke, one of the prisoners at the bar. He will also swear to you that Samuel Speke called one of the other two burglars ‘Bill,’ Bill, or William, being the name of the second prisoner in the dock, and the same whom Abraham Coggett will swear to have been the third person concerned in the burglary. James Nudge, the policeman, will tell you that William Stebbins and Samuel Speke were together when he took them into custody.

Lord Rendover will further depose as to the hour at which this violence was used, and will thus in every particular confirm the statement of Abraham Coggett. Gentlemen, I do not think I need detain you any longer. The four witnesses will be, Lord Rendover; Robert Hatton, Mr. Fleetwood's butler; Abraham Coggett, and James Nudge, one of the detectives who took the prisoners into custody. These I shall call in the order in which I have named them. And though I do not wish to treat the prisoners unfairly, the more so as they are undefended by counsel, I may conclude by asserting that I have no manner of doubt but that, when you have heard the entire case, you will find that they are clearly guilty of the serious charge laid against them. Lord Rendover."

All eyes were immediately turned in the direction of the bench, as Lord Rendover forthwith rose to his feet.

"You need not trouble yourself, Lord Rendover, to go round to the witness-box.

If it be agreeable to his lordship, you can be sworn, and I can examine you from where you are."

"Certainly; Lord Rendover need not be troubled to go round," said the judge, courteously. "The prisoners can see and hear him from this point equally well. So, I think, can the jury."

"Perfectly, my lord," said the foreman.

Lord Rendover bowed slightly, and was sworn. Then, in reply to Mr. Jump, the junior prosecuting counsel, he deposed as follows—

"On the seventeenth day of September last I was staying at Fleetwood Manse, the seat of Mr. Chichester Fleetwood. I will swear that I did not retire to rest before one o'clock after midnight. It was a singularly dark night for the time of the year. It had been raining all the afternoon. The rain had ceased. I looked out before going to bed. My bedroom was on the first floor, near to the library. Between the library and my bedroom was a sort of ante-

chamber; nothing more. There was a free communication between them, by means of doors that were unlocked. Beyond my room, on the other side, was another ante-chamber, very similar to the one of which I have spoken, and leading to a sort of curiosity-room where Mr. Fleetwood keeps articles of curiosity and *virtú*. These are not locked up, but always lying about, as in a drawing-room. It must have been about half-past one when I fell asleep. I will swear it was after one. Shortly after I was awoke—I cannot say by what—and found a light in the room. Before I could do anything——”

“Please, my lord,” exclaimed one of the prisoners, “may the other witnesses be sent out of the court?”

“Certainly; I should think they are not in it. It is very improper if they are.”

“I think they are all out, my lord, except Nudge the policeman.”

“But he must leave it, too. Officer, see that all the witnesses in this case are out of hearing.”

"Yes, my lord."

"Now, Mr. Jump," said his lordship, addressing the junior counsel, "we can go on. What do you ask Lord Rendover?"

"Before I could do anything," resumed the witness, "I was seized by the throat by a man, and pinned down to the bed. I recognise the right-hand prisoner at the bar, the one with the red hair, and with no whiskers or beard——"

"Samuel Speke, that is, my lord," said the counsel to the judge.

"Thank you, Mr. Jump," said his lordship, making a special note. "You can go on, Lord Rendover."

"I recognise that man as the one whose seized me by the throat and held me. I can swear to him. He held me down with enormous force. When I first opened my eyes and saw him, he had a mask on. But it fell off—I suppose from the effort I made on feeling his hands on my throat, and his effort to hold me down. He did not attempt to replace it. If he had attempted to do so, he would

have had to loosen his hold of me, and of course I should have tried to spring up, and could then have done so. I saw him quite plainly, and have no doubt whatsoever as to Samuel Speke at the bar being the same person. I am usually considered a strong man. Yes, a very strong man. Taken unawares, and under the circumstances, resistance was impossible. I did not shout. He held me in such a way that I could not. He said to me, 'I advise you to lie still. I'll not hurt you, if you don't force me to.' Those were his words, more or less, but certainly to that effect. He added, 'But if you stir or shout, I'll hurt you till you'll never stir or scream again.' When he had said this another man came near the bed. He had a mask on, and I did not see his face at all. The man who held me, and whose face I did see, said to him, 'All right, Bill. I've got him. Look sharp.' I will swear that he called him *Bill*. I heard it quite distinctly. The man whom he had called Bill, and a third man,

whose face I also did not see, went out of my room in the direction of the curiosity room. The man called Samuel Speke held me down all the time. He hurt me severely. I never saw the front part of the third man at all, not even to judge if he had a mask on. I can swear neither to him nor to the second man in the mask, but I will swear that the man who held me addressed the other man as Bill. At last I fainted, from pain and suffocation. When I came to myself again, they had all gone. It was still quite dark. At first I was not able to get out of bed. I came round by degrees. When I managed to get up, I lit my candle, and got myself some brandy out of my own dressing-bag. I felt better. I did not rouse the house. I considered it would have done no good. It was a pitch dark night, and I was only too glad to lie down again and try to sleep. Of course my nerves were shaken. Physically, I mean. My watch, my chain, two rings, some loose gold and silver, and a small pocket-book

were gone. I have seen nothing more of them."

"And I fear you never will," said the judge, jocosely.

"I fear not, my lord," replied Lord Rendover.

"I have nothing more to ask you, Lord Rendover," said Mr. Jump.

"Samuel Speke," said the judge, "have you anything to ask this witness?"

"Yes, my lord, I have. I want to ask him if he'll swear that he saw the face of the man who he says held him down?"

"He has already sworn that he did, and that he recognises you to have been that person."

"Then he's a perjured man, lord or no lord."

"Do you wish to ask him any questions? I wish to give you every opportunity of cross-questioning the witness, but I cannot allow you to abuse him or any other witness. You must confine yourself to asking questions."

"Do you mean to say, Lord Rendover, that you saw my face?"

"I do."

"How did you see it?"

"I saw it when your mask fell off."

"You swear that my mask fell off?"

"I do. I have already sworn it."

"Then you're a perjured man, you are, lord or no lord."

"Samuel Speke, I have already told you that you must not abuse the witnesses. You may ask them any questions which the law permits, but you must not abuse them. I am bound to tell you that the question you have already asked has done you no service. But ask any more you think fit."

"I've nothing more to ask him, my lord. He'll swear anything, that's quite plain, if he swears he saw me on that night."

"William Stebbins, have you anything to ask the witness? All that he has deposed to that could possibly tell against you, is that he heard Speke call somebody by the

name of Bill, but he does not say that he saw you or that he can speak to you in any way."

"No, and I'm sure he can't. No, I've nothing to ask him."

"Robert Hatton!" called out Mr. Boxall, the leading counsel who had opened the case for the prosecution—"Robert Hatton, Mr. Chichester Fleetwood's butler, my lord."

"Thank you, Brother Boxall, I have his name."

Robert Hatton was sworn, and deposed:

"I am butler to Mr. Chichester Fleetwood, of Fleetwood Manse. It is part of my duty, every night before retiring to rest, to see that the windows and shutters of the rooms on the ground floor at Fleetwood Manse are securely fastened. I remember the seventeenth day of September last. I went my round as usual that night, a little before midnight. All the windows and shutters were fastened, those in the dining-room among the rest. From information

which I received early on the morning of the eighteenth I went to the dining-room and found one of the shutters and one of the windows wide open, the others still remaining untouched as I had left them on going my rounds overnight before going to bed. There were earth marks on the window-sill and on the carpet by the window. These were still damp. It had been raining heavily the preceding day. There were also footmarks on the narrow slip of flower-bed outside the window. From information which I also received, I then went upstairs to the library, by a spiral staircase which leads thereto from a hall outside the dining-room. There I found a pair of rough strong boots, covered with earth and dirt, which were yet quite damp and moist. They were lying near to the wall where a window was going to be blocked up, but which had been temporarily filled up by planks being fastened across it. One of these planks I found had been partly removed, quite enough to admit of the entrance of a man's body."

"That is all I have got to ask this witness, my lord."

"Samuel Speke, have you any question to ask this witness?"

"No, my lord; he doesn't seem to have said nothing about me."

"William Stebbins, have you anything to ask this witness?"

"No, my lord; nothing that I know of."

"Abraham Coggett," called out Mr. Jump, rising from his seat again.

All eyes were turned in the direction of the witness-box as Abraham Coggett entered it. There was attached to him the triple interest belonging to witness, burglar, and informer. To the superficial spectator, he did not look anything like so great a scoundrel as the two prisoners in the dock. But to the keener analyser of human physiognomy, there was about him an air of ruffianism which they altogether lacked, and which comes only with some development of the intellectual faculties. His evidence, after he had been sworn and had

carefully kissed the book, was to the following effect—

“ I remember the night of the seventeenth day of September last. About one o'clock after midnight of that night, in company with Samuel Speke and William Stebbins, I reached Fleetwood Manse. Outside one end of the house was a scaffolding. I climbed up it and reached a wooden platform, where I proceeded to effect an entrance into the house. The two prisoners remained below. I effected my entrance through a planked-up opening in the wall. I did it without very much difficulty. It took me about twenty minutes to do it. When I was inside, I found myself in a big library. I took off my boots at once, in order to be able to move about more silently. There was a door at either end of the library. I crept across the library to the one on my right hand—I mean to the right of where I had entered. I opened it and found myself in a little ante-room which led, by another door, on to the top or landing of

a small spiral staircase. This last door stood wide open. I crept down the staircase, and found myself in a hall. To the left was a door. It too stood open, and led into what I fancy was a dining-room. There were three windows, all on the same side, the side where I knew my pals were waiting. I opened the shutters of one of them. I did it quite easily. I then opened the window. This also was done without difficulty. My pals were just outside. They were two in number. Only two. They were Samuel Speke and William Stebbins. I swear that. They got in through the window. They took off their boots. I led them upstairs the same way that I had descended, and into the library. There was nothing there worth taking. Nothing but books. We crept through the library to the door at the further end. We passed through it. It was a folding-door. We found ourselves in a small room or passage, just like the one at the other end of the library leading to the spiral staircase.

There was nothing in it. There was another door that led out of it. It was closed, but not locked. We opened it, and found ourselves in a bedchamber. A man was in bed and asleep. I had no mask on; I had forgotten to bring one. I was a young hand at the trade; I had never been concerned in a burglary before. I swear that. Samuel Speke and William Stebbins had masks on. They put them on in the dining-room as soon as ever they entered. Samuel Speke went to the bed. The man who was in bed awoke; not quite immediately, but almost. He did not scream. Samuel Speke seized him by the throat and held him down. I did not see that Samuel Speke's mask fell off. When it was all over, and we were both outside, he said to us, 'What a bad job that was, my mask falling off, when I was holding that fellow down; but he was in such a state I do not think he would know me again.' I will swear he used words to that effect. I will swear that, but I did not see his mask fall off. I do not

know, of my own knowledge, who the man was who was in bed. I have heard since that it was Lord Rendover. I was busy, together with William Stebbins, in taking what there was on the dressing-table. I remember we took a watch and chain, two rings, and some gold and silver. I cannot say how much; seven or eight pounds altogether. William Stebbins had gone through another room beyond, full of valuable things. Most of them were too big to carry. We took some of them. I followed him into that room. Samuel Speke was holding the man down all the time. For about five minutes, perhaps. We were in a hurry to get away. I think Speke, in speaking to Stebbins in the bedroom, called him 'Bill,' but I will not swear it. We went back to the dining-room the same way we had come. We went off as quickly as possible. The two prisoners put on their boots in the dining-room, where they had left them. I then remembered that I had left mine in the library. We were afraid to go back for

them. I got some of the money and spent it. I do not know what became of the watch and chain. Neither do I know what became of the other articles. I don't think I got my fair share of the things. That was not my reason for turning informer. I don't know what was my reason. I was afraid of being discovered. I never was concerned in any other burglary. I am very sorry at having been concerned in this one. A free pardon was offered to anybody who would inform. I suppose I shall obtain that pardon."

"That is all I ask this witness, my lord," said Mr. Jump, resuming his seat.

There was a slight pause, during which every tongue in the court seemed loosened to the extent of a whisper, save the tongues of the bar, immediately under the judge, which again broke forth in chaff considerably above an undertone.

"Lucky for Fuddleton Mr. Samuel Speke and his friends did not find their way into his room instead of Lord Rendover's."

"Devilish bad thing they didn't. I think the squeeze of that fellow would have done for him and choked him off permanently."

"Silence in the court!" shouted the crier.

"Samuel Speke," said his lordship, "have you anything to ask this witness?"

"Yes, my lord, a good deal."

"Ask it then. But you must ask him questions."

The prisoner stood upon one leg, and then upon another, raised his left arm and then his right, as if gathering himself up for the encounter. He seemed as though he would have liked to "put it to the witness" more forcibly than language can perform that operation. But being limited by the forms of the court, he confined himself to the following pertinent queries.

"Your name's Abraham Coggett, isn't it?"

"It is," said the witness, doggedly, "if that'll do you any good."

"Witness," said his lordship, severely—it was the first time during the trial that his

lordship had manifested any signs of severity. "Witness, do not argue with the prisoner, or address any remarks to him, that are not answers to his questions."

"No, my lord," answered the witness, obsequiously.

"Your name's Abram Coggett," resumed the first prisoner. "So it is. Well now, Abram Coggett, you mean to swear that I and Bill Stebbins here was with you when you say you committed a burglary at Fleetwood Manse?"

"You know you were."

"And that you let us in through the dining-room window and took us upstairs to the library, and then to a bedroom where there was a gentleman asleep?"

In this fashion, and in this tedious manner, Sam Slaughteros evidently thought it his bounden duty to ask the witness over again all the questions which had already been put to him by the prosecution. But as he received in reply precisely the same answers which had already been given, and

only interlarded what can scarcely be called his cross-questioning with personal remarks not at all complimentary to Mr. Abraham Coggett, for which he was over and over again gently rebuked by the judge, we need not set them down at length. At last, he seemed to get to something more material.

“ You say you came down straight from the library to the dining-room to let us in, without first going into the bedroom where you say we afterwards went when we was all upstairs?”

“ Yes, I do say so. I have said so all along.”

“ You didn’t first go into the bedroom and find a gentleman asleep, and then go downstairs?”

“ No, I did not.”

Both prisoners made gestures of impatience and surprise.

“ Then why did you tell us——”

Here the other prisoner gave Sam a sharp poke in the ribs with his elbow, and whispered something. Bully Bill probably

saw that his fellow in distress was about to ask a question which would be injurious to both of them, without doing any good. His lordship probably saw that, too; for he said to Speke—

“Prisoner! You have a right to ask what questions you think fit. But the questions you are asking at present can certainly do you no good, and may do you harm. I think it right to tell you so. And now do as you think best.”

“Thank you, my lord. But why he says what he has been saying just now, I can't think. At any rate, he's a false man, and has perjured himself, that he has.”

There was more to this effect. Then there were further questions, either mere repetitions or utterly immaterial. At last he asked—

“You swear that I said to you and Bill, after we was gone away and off the premises, ‘What a bad job it was my mask falling off?’”

“I do. I have already sworn it.”

“Will you swear it again?”

“Yes, I will.”

“Then you’re forsworn, Abram Coggett, and you know it. Why don’t you swear, as t’other chap did, that you saw me with my mask off at the bedside?”

“Because I did not see you with it off—that’s why.”

“No, nor *he* didn’t neither. But you know that I never said no word to you about the mask, and you’re a false man, Abram Coggett. That he is, my lord.”

“The jury will be the judges of that,” said his lordship. “Have you any more questions to ask the witness?”

“Yes, my lord, I have.”

Again he shifted his feet, and moved his arms restlessly, and faced the witness still more determinedly.

“Now, Abram Coggett, do you remember coming to me and Bill here, just afore we was took into custody on this charge, and asking us to go down to the west of England?”

"No, I do not. I never did anything of the kind."

"O—o—h!" exclaimed both the prisoners together.

"And asking us to help you in a habduction that 'ud bring us in a lot of money?"

"No, I do not. It's all pure invention, my lord."

"What was the date of the prisoners' being arrested?" asked his lordship, turning over the depositions before him.

"The thirty-first day of October, my lord," said Mr. Jump.

"Six weeks after the burglary, then?"

"Just so, my lord," said Mr. Boxall.

"Prisoner," said his lordship, "we are not here to find out what occurred on the thirty-first day of October, whatever it may have been. We are here to try what occurred on the night of the seventeenth of September; and you must confine yourself to the question of the burglary."

"But, my lord, he denies that just before we was arrested——"

“Listen to me, Samuel Speke,” said his lordship, slowly and distinctly. “Has the question which you wish to put about the thirty-first day of October, and the proposal to go into the West of England, got anything to do with the burglary at Fleetwood Manse on the seventeenth of September?”

“No, my lord. I can’t say as it has.”

“Then you cannot ask him anything about it here. The witness says that he did not ask you to go into the West of England just before you were arrested. But even if he did, it is not at all to the purpose. You yourself say that it had no connexion with the burglary. And the court cannot be occupied with all the transactions which you may have had with the witness during your life. Have you anything further to ask him in connexion with the evidence which he has given against you either here or elsewhere?”

“No, my lord. But he’s sworn falsely, that he has.”

"William Stebbins," said his lordship, "have you any question to put to Abraham Coggett?"

Of course Bully Bill had a good many questions to put to him. But they were the questions of his comrade Sam Slaughteros put over again in a different manner, but with the same result. He afforded the court a considerable amount of amusement. He was more excited still than his fellow-prisoner, once or twice in the heat of the moment addressed the witness as "Now, young 'un," and ended by declaring that, "if any fellow ever deserved scragging, it's you, Abram Coggett, and no mistake." He tried hard, just as Speke had tried, to be allowed to put questions to the witness concerning a transaction which had taken place among them just before his and Speke's arrest. But as, like the other prisoner, he was compelled to reply, in answer to the judge, that the transaction had no connexion with the present charge, he was obliged to desist from a course of

examination on which he seemed to have set his heart. Failing this, he concluded by saying that he had nothing more to ask the witness, and then plunged into a heated but whispered conversation with his companion in the dock.

“James Nudge,” called out Mr. Boxall, “the detective, my lord.”

James Nudge was sworn, and answered as follows—

“From information which I received, I went with two other policemen in plain clothes, on the early morning of the thirty-first of October, to the Duppington Branch Railway Station. The up train to London was due at 5.20. We arrived there about five minutes after five. The prisoners were on the platform, and were together, walking up and down, and talking together. The train was a few minutes before its time. The prisoners were getting into a second-class carriage when I and the men who were with me handcuffed them and took them into custody. They did not resist.

We did not give them time. I told them the nature of the charge; they said it was a rum go, or something to that effect. They wanted the money back for their tickets, which were for London. They had only thirty shillings between the two upon them. Abraham Coggett was not with them."

"That is all I ask this witness, my lord."

Both the prisoners declared that they had nothing to ask James Nudge, for what he had sworn was quite true. Only they thought it was rather hard they had not been allowed to have the money back for the tickets which they were not allowed to use.

"That is the case for the prosecution, my lord," said Mr. Boxall.

"Lord Rendover," said his lordship, "will you be good enough to stand forward again, just one moment? I want to ask you if you have fully described the violence that you say was used against you. Had any of the burglars any weapon? And did they make any threats save those with which you have already acquainted us?"

"None whatsoever, my lord; at least, I saw no weapons."

"Thank you; that will do."

Lord Rendover resumed his seat.

The prisoners had then the chance offered them of addressing the jury. This they both did, but not at any great length or with any remarkable effect. They were not distinguished orators, either Bully Bill or Sam Slaughteros.

"Gentlemen of the jury," then began his lordship, "it is now my duty to address you upon this case, which, though of a most serious complexion, is nevertheless, as the learned counsel for the prosecution remarked, very simple in its character. I cannot but commend the learned counsel for his discretion in not occupying your time with a more lengthened statement than the one with which he opened the case. The witnesses are few, and singularly clear in their evidence. It is for you to decide whether that evidence be as trustworthy as it is clear. If you wish it, I will

read over to you the whole of the evidence as I took it down from their lips."

"We do not think that will be necessary, my lord," said the foreman, after a brief conference with his colleagues.

"Very well, gentlemen; you will be pleased then to give your best attention to the following remarks."

His lordship then proceeded to state and explain in exact terms the precise nature of the charge, and continued as follows—

"The evidence of Abraham Coggett, the informer, is as clear and as intelligible as evidence well could be. The only question is—Is it true? Despite its clearness, I should be compelled, gentlemen, to warn you against laying conclusive stress upon it, if it stood unsupported by the testimony of some other witness more reputable than an informer can ever hope to be considered. But the evidence of Abraham Coggett is not unsupported. It is supported in all its leading particulars by Lord Rendover. Lord Rendover swears

in the most positive manner to Samuel Speke being the man who held him down in bed, and he swears with equal positiveness to hearing Speke call one of the other two burglars 'Bill.' If you believe Lord Rendover's evidence, the case would seem to be conclusive against Speke. But against William Stebbins the evidence is not so direct, though you may possibly think it is equally positive. His name is William, whilst that of the other burglar, Coggett, the informer, is Abraham; and, perhaps, it did not escape your notice that Samuel Speke, in speaking of him in the dock to-day spoke of him as 'Bill.' They are found together—it is true, six weeks after—at Duppington Station, and together are taken into custody. And Abraham Coggett swears positively that this 'Bill' concerned in the burglary was no other than William Stebbins. If, then, you believe Lord Rendover, who swears positively to Speke being the man who held him down you will be left to draw your own conclu-

sion as to whether the 'Bill,' whom Coggett swears to have been William Stebbins, really was or was not William Stebbins, the second prisoner at the bar. I do not think that I need dwell upon any other point. Both of the prisoners seemed very anxious to question Abraham Coggett as to some transaction which may or may not have taken place among them just before they were taken into custody. But, gentlemen, it would do us no good to go into all the particulars of the lives of the two prisoners, or of their relations with Abraham Coggett. Perhaps they wished to bring before your notice some incident which they think would discredit Abraham Coggett in your eyes. In that case, I think you will agree with me that to go into such matters would be a complete throwing away of your time and the time of the court. Nothing that they could lay before you of that nature would discredit Abraham Coggett more than he is probably discredited in your eyes already. Fortunately

for the ends of justice, it is not his credit on which the decision of this case will rest. But more probably still, in asking the questions which you saw I refused to be put, after ascertaining from the prisoners themselves that the questions had no connexion with the burglary at Fleetwood Manse, the prisoners wanted to elicit some fact which would show how the informant had betrayed them into the hands of justice. But, gentlemen, it would not be of advantage to the ends of justice, or of the slightest use to you in your investigation into the guilt or innocence of the prisoner, to know how Abraham Coggett went about introducing them to the officers of the law. We do not want to know anything of the sort. We want only to know who committed the burglary at Fleetwood Manse on the night of the seventeenth of September. If you think that the prisoners at the bar were concerned in that burglary, you will bring in a verdict of guilty against both of them.

If you think that neither was implicated in it, you will acquit them. Or should it so happen that you think one was there and one was not, you will draw a distinction in your verdict accordingly. Nothing but proof, not mere suspicion, is sufficient to convict them. You have heard the evidence, evidence as clear as any I ever heard in my life. And now, gentlemen, consider if it seems to you to be conclusive."

The consultation of the jury was exceedingly brief. In about five minutes the foreman declared that they had considered their verdict, and that they found both of the prisoners guilty.

His lordship then addressed them. Never was there, he said, a case more conclusively proved. Had it been one of perplexity, he would have assigned them counsel. But he had not wished to lengthen a case, when lengthening it could not possibly have been of any service to either of them. Fortunately for them, there was no record

of any other crime against them. Fortunately for them also, Lord Rendover was a strong man, and had not permanently suffered from the violence used against him. Fortunately for them further, they had made use of no weapons. It was true that only one of the prisoners had laid hands upon Lord Rendover. But they were both concerned in a burglary in which it was necessary that one of the two should use violence, and he saw no reason for drawing any distinction between the two. Sentence of death had often been carried out against such offences, and might yet be pronounced. He should, however, content himself with sentencing them both to penal servitude for the term of their natural lives.

Then there was a bustle in the court. The prisoners were led out of the dock, and a fresh batch were brought in. Lord Rendover bowed to the judge and the high sheriff, and in company with Mr. Chichester Fleetwood quitted the court.

Another penwiper was shied at Fuddleton, who hastened out to intercept Lord Rendover and have a few words with "his friend" in the passage. Abraham Coggett had wholly disappeared.

CHAPTER II.

MASTER OF THE POSITION.

ABOUT a week after the trial narrated in the last chapter, Lord Rendover was sitting in his study in his house in Park Lane, London. It was about six o'clock; the fire was burning brightly, and he was sitting before it alone, and in the lowest and most comfortable of easy chairs.

It was not a large apartment, and had not any striking air of splendour. It really seemed made more for use than luxury. It was luxurious withal when you came to use it, and full of rare and curious articles, when you came closely to examine them.

He was in a lazy and almost sleepy attitude, but for all that he was wide awake.

He was simply beguiling half-an-hour before going upstairs to dress for a diplomatic dinner, by reflecting on the success of his recent enterprises.

“Was there ever such a lucky thing as that burglary?” he was thinking to himself. “It came in the very nick of time; and how fortunate that I had the happy idea of turning it to such good account! What a cur that Abraham must be! But only just to think of the credulity of those other two fellows. I suppose they despised Abraham, and thought he could never do them any harm. I must not commit the same fault. I wonder I have seen nothing of him since the trial; but he’s sure to turn up, if only for his reward. Devilish well I did not pay those fellows beforehand, or they would have employed counsel, and who knows what might have happened then? One does not see how anybody could have ferreted out the truth; but some of those criminal lawyers are such wonderful hands at guessing, and getting a thing by bully-

ing out of a coward like Abraham. But everything went just as one could have wished it. Deuced well done, 'pon my word. Come in."

The door opened.

"Please, my lord, there's a man wants to see your lordship."

"What's his name, Davey?"

"Mr. Richard Thornton, my lord."

"Thornton—Thornton—Thornton. I know no Richard Thornton."

"I rather think he's come about my place, my lord."

"Did he say so, Davey?"

"No, my lord, but he looks like it."

"Have you quite made up your mind to go?"

"Yes, please, my lord, I think I must. You see, my lord, it's a case of marrying, and we've a good chance of setting up nicely. And I trust your lordship wont take it ill of us. We count upon your lordship's favour and patronage, we do, I can assure you, my lord."

“And you will have it, Davey. I am sorry you are going, but you are quite right not to throw away a good chance. Show the man in.”

The man shown in certainly did look for all the world as though he had come to offer himself for the situation of valet that was soon to be vacated by Mr. John Davey—promoted to matrimony and a pickle shop in Piccadilly. He looked as though he had been born a domestic servant, precisely at the indefinite age at which he now was, and beyond which it seemed as though it was impossible he should ever get.

There are many types of the domestic man-servant. The least common, but on the whole the most valuable, is the serio-comic. It combines the excellent qualities of two other types, the dignified and the good-humoured. Your serio-comic butler or valet looks as though in a moment more he would be on the broad grin, but he never gets as far even as a faint smile. His respectability cannot be tampered with. But

there is no more chance of his becoming familiar than of his permitting anybody to be familiar with him.

The man who had just entered was of that rare and precious type. Your first inclination, on seeing his face, was to burst out laughing in it. Your second was to be ashamed of your inclination. His complexion was florid, hairless, and somewhat dinted. His eyes were blue, but not darkly, beautifully blue, and his forehead was a large meaningless expanse surmounted by a curly red wig, which made no pretence whatsoever not to be one, but which looked boldly back to your scrutiny, as much as to say, "Yes, I am a wig. And what if I am?" Ugly, Mr. Richard Thornton unquestionably was, if the word must be used in its conventional sense. Nevertheless, there was about him an air, which, considered in the valet point of view, was almost distinguished. His figure was not singularly good, but his clothes fitted him well, and he fitted them still better. Lord Ren-

dover felt at a glance that Davey's surmise was a correct one. He had risen and was standing with his back to the fire.

"Yes. What is it you may want with me?"

"Don't you remember me, my lord?" the man said.

"No, I can't say that I do. Indeed, I do not recall you in the least. And I very much question if I ever saw you before."

"I beg your pardon, my lord; but you have, and many a time."

"Thornton—Thornton. I don't even remember your name. What have you come about? About taking the place of Davey, my valet?"

"No, my lord, I have not come about that. But is your lordship quite sure that your lordship does not remember me?"

"Quite sure. But tell me what your business is; for I am busy, and must be going directly."

Mr. Richard Thornton changed his feet,

slightly twirled his hat, cleared his voice, and said—

“I’m not sorry that your lordship does not remember me. But,” and here he looked cautiously round the room, “please, my lord, I’m Abraham Coggett.”

Lord Rendover was on the very verge of bursting out into a fit of laughter. Had the man addressing him been his equal, he would have freely indulged in that natural tendency. But remembering, with equal rapidity, the relation in which he stood to this fellow, he checked himself in time, and said, quietly—

“You don’t say so? Upon my word, it’s a very pretty disguise. I did not know you in the least.”

It really was not wonderful. Abraham Coggett was a half-caste Jew in whom all distinctness of race had been lost. He had rather thick lips and broad nostrils; but he had none of that markedness of feature which ordinarily belongs to the outcast people. In former times he had allowed

what little hair would come upon his face to grow unimpeded; and it had been, like that upon his head, of a dirty, rusty, dry brown. Its disappearance from his lip and cheeks, and its supersedure on his skull by the red wig, had wrought a transformation as perfect as ingenuity could have devised. Recognition of the former man under the altered circumstances was perfectly impossible. No wonder that Lord Rendover even now, with the knowledge thus imparted to him, and the assistance of Abraham's voice, could scarcely bring himself to believe that the billiard-marker of Potzer's stood before him. What remained of the man was so small an item against what in the man had undergone thorough metamorphosis.

Lord Rendover looked at him carefully and earnestly for about half a minute, during which Abraham's eyes fell. His was not the gaze to meet any person's long, and least of all such a person as was now scrutinizing him. Having apparently finished the investigation, Lord Rendover

began pacing slowly up and down the study, in much the same way that Abraham had seen him pace up and down the library at Fleetwood Manse, before informing the intruder that he might carry out the burglary. Abraham did not half like it. He had felt afraid of a great many people in his life, but he had never felt so afraid of anybody as of Lord Rendover.

“And you have come to see what I can do for you, Abraham, have you?”

“Yes, please, my lord, I have.”

The question was not the mere affectation of secure patronage as against a very insecure client. Lord Rendover was speaking pretty much as he felt. But it had the effect of making Abraham feel more than ever the superiority of the speaker.

“It all turned out very well. I suppose you have had no more trouble?”

“None at all, my lord, I thank your lordship.”

“The police been troublesome?”

“No, my lord. I’ve seen nothing of

them. I've kept out of their way. And I don't think the sharpest of them would know me now, my lord."

"I don't think they would. Those two fellows did not seem to have any idea for whom they were employed down at Dipleydale."

"Not an idea, my lord. I think I did that business well for you, my lord."

"Yes, Abraham, you did; exceedingly well."

A bolder scoundrel might have pretended that Bully Bill and Sam Slaughteros had just some suspicions on the subject, if only to keep a weapon in reserve and hang it in terror over the main culprit. But over and above Abraham's conviction that nothing on earth could terrify Lord Rendover, and that the slightest attempt to terrify him would only end by Lord Rendover's getting him out of the way as quickly and effectually as the other two had been got out of the way, it was also more consonant with Abraham's nature to rely for his advance-

ment upon others' favour rather than upon their fears.

"They hadn't a notion, my lord. I told them from the first that, unless they chose to trust me entirely, they wouldn't be trusted by my employer; but that if they did their part of the work rightly without finding out what they were not intended to know, they would be handsomely rewarded by him."

"Poor devils! I'm sorry they got nothing for it. But it couldn't be helped," he added.

Selfish men are often not without compassion. And Lord Rendover never sacrificed anybody when he could save him. He would not have hurt a fly—unless it had happened to be on his nose. Then of course he would have crushed it. But he would have treated his godfather with like utilitarian impartiality.

"I have run a great risk, my lord," Abraham resumed. "Had those fellows not been convicted, but had come out of

prison again, they'd have been the death of me."

"Do you suppose they connect the Dipleydale expedition with their capture at Duppington Station?"

"I don't suppose they do, my lord. They're scarcely sharp enough for that. But I mean they'd have been the death of me for giving evidence against them about the burglary. I ran a deal of risk; indeed I did, my lord."

All this was said with the intention of laying before Lord Rendover the extent of his services, of stimulating gratitude, and increasing the reward which he was to get. Lord Rendover saw this plainly enough, and rather dashed Abraham's hopes by the quiet, disenchanting, and terrible reminder—

"Perfectly true, Abraham. You have run a great deal of risk; and I should say that your risks are by no means at an end. Only you must remember that they all began by your foolishly attempting that

burglary at Fleetwood Manse last September. All the rest has been but a natural consequence. Committing it has done you no harm. It was the first attempt that first brought you into danger, and you were a great fool for your pains. I let you off when I had you on the sofa in the library. I do not see how anything you have done since has at all made your position any worse. Indeed, it has made it considerably better."

This was an intimation to Master Abraham that the relative position of himself and Lord Rendover was either precisely what it was the night of the burglary, or any other that Lord Rendover might choose to make it. Abraham might choose amongst these two. But there was no third.

"I hope everything went well, my lord, after the successful affair at Dipleldale, and that your lordship has had no more bother."

"Perfectly well, thank you," said Lord Rendover, drily. "I cannot say that I have

not had any more bother, inasmuch as I never had any at all from the very beginning."

The speaker looked quietly at Abraham, as he said this, and Abraham's eyes again fell. Lord Rendover continued—

"I suppose you have come to see what I am inclined to do to help you out of your mess generally? Expelled from Potzer's, unable to obtain any other situation in London, now a confessed burglar, and an informer on the top of it all, I can well understand that you want somebody to give you a hand. Honest men will not have you ; and dishonest men, if they dare, would tear you to pieces. Well, I will do my very best for you. But I should be glad to hear your own views on the subject. I suppose you have thought the matter well over?"

"Yes, my lord, I have thought a great deal about it," answered Abraham, a little crestfallen. "I thought at one time that I had better"—and Abraham paused for a

suitable word—"emigrate, you know, my lord. I thought that would suit your lordship also."

"It would suit me well enough," answered Lord Rendover, indifferently. "But then your staying at home would suit me just as well. Indeed, I fail to see how I am personally interested in your movements one way or the other."

"Thank you, my lord. Then I'd rather stay in England. Those were my second thoughts. Your lordship sees how easy it is to disguise one's self."

"Exceedingly easy, it would seem. I should never have known you."

"Just so, my lord. And that being so, why should I go into foreign parts, when I'd rather remain where I am?"

"I see no reason whatsoever."

"Well, he is a cool hand," thought Abraham to himself, and then he added aloud, in a plaintive, meek, appealing tone—

"I think I have been of some service to your lordship."

"Of *some* service, Abraham? Of very considerable service. You have been very useful indeed, no question of it. And I am quite ready to get and keep you out of the trouble into which you have been fool enough to bring yourself."

Abraham's miserable little bosom took courage at this. Lord Rendover was not going to try to throw him over. As his lordship could not be frightened, it was exceedingly fortunate that he should be conciliated.

"Well, you know, my lord," he said, hesitatingly, "when a nobleman in your lordship's position wants to help a man like me, there's generally only one way of his doing it. He gives him—money, my lord."

"Well, Abraham, go on. I want to hear your notion."

"I don't want to be bold and hextortionate, my lord." Abraham usually spoke correctly enough ; but the length of the word which he had got hold of, combined with his hesitation and his sense of the

gravity of the occasion, had betrayed him into the slip of inserting a superfluous aspirate. "I don't want to be bold and hextortionate, my lord; but if your lordship would only give me enough to enable me to set up honestly for myself somewhere."

Abraham was really speaking his inmost mind. He would much rather have led an honest life than a dishonest one, because he thought that on the whole it was safer. But the very same cowardice that made him prefer honesty for security's sake, had driven him into dishonest courses and would drive him into them again, the moment that honesty brought him into straits of poverty which he had not the courage to endure or to contend with. His only preference for the one over the other arose out of the amount of petty physical comfort which it might bring him.

"And how much would be required for the purpose?" asked Lord Rendover.

"I would rather leave that to your lordship to decide."

Lord Rendover again began walking up and down the study, just as he had walked up and down it before. This walking up and down always gave Abraham an unpleasant sensation. It brought to his mind that scene in the library from which, as Lord Rendover had said, all his risks and troubles had commenced. At last his lordship halted, and resumed his original position of standing on the hearth with his back to the fire. Then he said, judicially—

“I think your notion a foolish one. You will be better under the cover of more direct protection and patronage. As I told you, you have been useful to me, and I wish to serve you. Before you entered, my servant told me that he thought you had come to apply for his place, which will very shortly be vacant. To tell you the truth, when I first saw you, I thought precisely the same. Your disguise is perfect. I should never have recognised you, and there is not the slightest chance of anybody else doing so. You shall take Davey's place. I will

employ you as my valet. It will suit me well enough, and will afford you the most effectual security against those whom you have most to dread. None of your old companions would expect to find you here, even if they possibly might recognise you when they saw you in places more likely for you to be found in. Davey goes in ten days, and you can come as soon as ever he is out of the house."

"But, my lord," said Abraham, "I have never acted as valet, and I know nothing about it."

"There is no particular cunning in it. You will learn, and I shall be patient with you at first. You may consider it as settled."

"But, my lord," said Abraham again. He had not had time to consider the scheme, and scarcely knew as yet how he should like it. But Lord Rendover stopped him abruptly.

"It's no use raising imaginary difficulties. I am quite satisfied, and so will

you be, when you have tried. You will find it a pleasanter life than you ever led before. Just a couple of questions, and then you must go. Has anybody helped you to disguise yourself?"

"Nobody, my lord. There was nobody I dared trust."

"That's all right. What made you take the name of Richard Thornton?"

"I don't know, my lord, precisely. Fancy, my lord; accident."

"Then keep it. It will do very well. As my valet, your name will be Thornton. Your wages will be eighty pounds a year; and I shall make a suitable provision for you in case of my death."

"Thank you, my lord. But your lordship's is a better life than mine. And if I don't do, or I don't—don't—like the place, my lord, what then? Perhaps I shan't suit your lordship."

"Yes, you will. You'll do, I have no doubt of it. But if you do not happen to like it, why then—then you must go to the

devil your own way. But you'll like it, I have no fear. There's a ten-pound note to be going on with. Come here again on Thursday, to get my final orders. And now you must go."

His lordship rang the bell, and Davey came and showed Mr. Richard Thornton out.

"Never do," said his lordship to himself as he was being driven to dinner, "to have that fellow going about the world, getting into fresh mischief, and dropping foolish hints, and blabbing about his past scrapes and misfortunes. Better make him respectable and have him about one. Gad! what a good disguise. Looks just like a valet. He might have got himself up on purpose. He's such a coward that he'll always be in the power of somebody or other. Much better therefore to keep him in mine. He will be useful again, I have no doubt. He has made me rather late. I hope the dinner wont be any worse. I'm awfully hungry. This is it, surely?"

The carriage pulled up. The door was opened, the steps were let down, and Lord Rendover passed in, through a file of powdered footmen, to partake of his Excellency's famed hospitality.

CHAPTER III.

HYDE PARK HELPS OUR STORY.

THE season had at length commenced in good earnest. The sunshine had come, the leaves had come, and the people had come. It was the middle of May, and about half-past six in the evening. Both Drive and Row were thronged, and yet more carriages and more and more horsemen and horsewomen were still entering the Park by Apsley Gate.

All the choice young bloods of the town were sitting on the sweep of rail that commands the approach both to the Drive and to the Row, and their comments were freely expressed on each fresh arrival.

“Gad! what a seat! It must be the new

attaché at the French embassy. He'll never get as far as the Serpentine."

"There goes old Lady Fitzcumber. By Jove! she's had a new carriage. Young Fitz should apply for an injunction against her extravagance. She can't live through the season, and she's squandering the poor boy's property as fast as ever she can."

"Isn't that Broadstairs? He's all right again, it seems."

"What was amiss with him?"

"Got his head broken at his election by his Liberal opponents."

Suddenly there was quiet among the babblers, and every hat was doffed as a girl, admirably mounted, with an easy seat, and a face radiant with loveliness, with an elderly gentleman on one side and a fresh pretty-looking woman on the other, came slowly into the Row.

"I told you she had come back."

"How wonderful she looks!"

"Lovelier than ever! By Jove, there's nobody to touch her!"

"Who was it?" asked a very young man, who was evidently cutting his fashionable teeth. He leaned down and spoke in a whisper to his neighbour as though ashamed of his question, yet unable to repress his curiosity.

His neighbour was a kindly and willing mentor, and replied in a like undertone.

"Miss Blessington—Beauty Blessington, as we call her."

"Oh, that was Beauty Blessington, was it? She's a stunner, and no mistake," said the young enthusiast.

"Who was that with her?" asked one of them, aloud.

"Her father, to be sure; who do you suppose it would be?"

"I know that; but I mean the girl on the other side of her."

"That's Mrs. Grantley Morris."

"Oh, Lord Brakecliffe's daughter, that married that rich city Morris. Good little woman: always was."

"Good as gold," said another. "But isn't Miss Blessington looking handsome?"

And did you see how she moved to the whole lot of us? I'll be bound it seemed to every fellow as though she moved to him especially, and yet every one of us knows well enough that she didn't. She's the best sort we've had for many a day."

"I don't think she's half the fun many other girls are," said a bold dashing dissident.

"Neither do I. And then she's so devilish clever," said another.

Meanwhile the subject of these remarks had ridden on with her companions, and was greeted by numbers of people who felt contented even with nothing more than her graciously returned salutation. By degrees, however, the three became the centre of a considerable cavalcade. One of the first to join them was Mr. Chichester Fleetwood. Not very long after Percy Carryngton rode up. Others followed, more known to fame, but less important to our story. Of course there was something like general conversation; but everybody strove in his question

or remark to attract the attention of Gertrude Blessington, who thus became the rallying-point of all the talk that went on. "Don't you think so, Miss Blessington?" and "What is your opinion, Miss Blessington?" was being constantly said across horses' heads, by men frantic to have their share of her, though prior comers had got nearer to her person, and obstinately held that ground of public vantage.

"When did you get back to town, Miss Blessington?" asked one.

"Only four days ago. We came up straight from Worcestershire."

"Why did you abandon us all so long?" asked another.

"Papa was high sheriff this year, and he does not like to be in the country alone. Besides, mamma and I had duties to perform, and very heavy ones, I assure you. And we were so much fagged by performing them that, when the assizes were over, we thought we ought to stay on there, and get up our looks again."

"You thoroughly succeeded," said three or four voices together.

She smiled, and bowed playfully.

"It was the very least we could do before appearing before such fastidious critics. But then it was so lovely in the country. It has been such a spring for blossom; all the farmers about said they had never seen such a year for orchards. And the lilacs and laburnums, and the may—they were in perfection when we left. Really we were quite sorry to come away, were we not, papa dear?"

"That we were. And if it had not been for me, I believe we should have all been there yet. But I confess I like my club for a change."

"And Miss Blessington likes ballrooms for a change, I suspect," suggested Chichester Fleetwood; "do you not, now?"

"Perfectly true; I have no desire to be a milkmaid altogether."

"How is Mrs. Blessington?" asked Car-ryngton.

“Mamma is very well indeed, thank you; she is in the park, driving with Lady Brakecliffe, somewhere.”

Then there were polite inquiries of Mrs. Grantley Morris about her ladyship. Guinivere was a favourite of everybody's, but in a quiet unenthusiastic way. She did not get much of the conversation, save incidentally. She was married, and an excellent little wife, and not very brilliant; and she was well pleased that the talk should eddy round Gertrude, whom she worshipped with all her warm, simple, superstitious heart.

“Is it true, Carryngton,” asked Chichester Fleetwood, “that you are thinking of turning legislator? That's the last bit of club talk.”

Anybody who had been watching Miss Blessington's face closely would have remarked that, as this last question was asked, it suddenly assumed a look of serious interest which, during all the foregoing babble, had been altogether wanting. She

frankly turned her eyes on Carryngton as he answered.

"I am thinking of it, if I can get any constituency to accept me. But I have taken no decided steps as yet."

"You will surely have no difficulty, Mr. Carryngton, will you?"

"I cannot say I shall have no difficulty; but I do not anticipate any that will prove insurmountable. Luckily it depends upon other circumstances than my merits. When do you stand, Fleetwood?"

"As soon as there's a vacancy for Leverstoke. Once there is that, it is a very simple matter."

"Lucky man!" said Carryngton. "How the M.P.'s all round us must envy you! Can anybody tell me why members of the House of Commons almost invariably ride so badly?"

"Because their seats are so insecure, I suppose," said Miss Blessington, slyly.

She did not wait for the "bravas" which greeted her wit, but went on—

“What puzzles me far more is, how they can find time to ride here as much as they do. Ought they not to be at the House?”

“You are hard upon them,” pleaded Fleetwood, with an eye to his own future. “When I am a member, I sincerely trust I shall be able to find time to show myself in the Row ever and anon.”

“You will only be doing what so many do,” she replied. “But I want to know if the many are doing their duty by being here.”

“The duties of a legislator,” said Percy Carryngton, assuming a magnificent and judicial air, “are of a high and exacting order, when we regard them from the theoretical point of view. He ought to leave father and mother, sister and brother, and certainly all his cousins, to follow the Speaker. A purse, however, will be absolutely necessary; and scrip, though it may prevent him from sitting upon railway committees, will not otherwise be any dis-

advantage. There are authorities who think that he had better have two coats, but they are not indispensable. Upon the first point, however—that of giving up all his relations—there is unanimity of opinion. And the theory, when pushed to its extreme, forbids him the luxury of a wife, the comforts of a home, and condemns him to perpetual chambers. How many legislators, I ask, comply with these conditions?"

All saw the fun, if all did not see the real meaning, of the mock-heroic speech. One of the party, however, seemed to have a glimpse of both.

"Do you really think, Mr. Carryngton," said Miss Blessington, "that an earnest member of Parliament ought to remain single?"

"Ought is a strong word. But I really think he would act more wisely if he did so."

There was a chorus of "Ohs!" at this assertion, in which nobody joined more vociferously than Chichester Fleetwood.

"This is evidently Mr. Carryngton's

warning to society," he said; "his farewell to the female world, before addressing his independent electors. It is his justification beforehand for a perverse life of celibacy. Is it not, Carryngton?"

"But," said Mrs. Morris, "is it not in this case a little rash to be off with the old love before you are on with the new? Why announce to society that you fling it over *before* you get into Parliament?"

"It is the enthusiasm of the convert," said Mr. Fleetwood. "Once in the House he will return to the old love, or at least divide his heart and his allegiance."

"But will society take him back?" said somebody, presuming, on Carryngton's good-humoured silence under the banter which he had provoked, to carry it a step stupidly too far.

"I do not think there is much fear of that," said Miss Blessington, dealing out the reward which she thought his wit and his good temper deserved, and not caring to have the argument carried any further.

He was quite content to retire behind the cloud of her protection.

Mr. Blessington had dropped behind some time since, where he had been joined by an old Worcestershire squire like himself, and subsequently by Lord Rendover. The former had gone home to dinner, and he and Lord Rendover were now riding alone.

"A fine fellow your young cousin seems to be. All the folks seem to like him, and Gertrude is always praising him up to us."

"He is a promising young fellow, there can be no doubt of it. I have never repented taking him by the hand, and I want him to do still more for himself. He must go into Parliament."

"You're quite prepared to help him in that, I suppose?"

"Quite, and I have told him so. He ought to do well there."

"So Gertrude says, and women are often good judges of these things."

"I should imagine she is a good judge

of most things, and I am very glad to hear that she thinks well of him. They seem to be capital good friends. What say you to making them better ones? To their being more closely connected than they now are?"

"How? You don't mean to propose young Carryngton to me as a son-in-law, do you?" asked the blunt squire.

"No, indeed," said Lord Rendover, with a slight laugh. "Percy is too bold a fellow for that. If he wanted to marry Miss Blessington, he would not get any ambassador to do his work for him. He would go direct to you himself, no doubt. I do mean, however, to propose to you a son-in-law:—viz., myself."

"You don't mean that, Rendover?" said the squire, hastily.

"Yes, I do; just in so many words."

"You do me great honour, I am sure," he answered more slowly, and with a touch of proud, stately, old-world courtesy in his voice.

"Like yourself," said Lord Rendover, "I stick to the old forms." How soon the sons of ennobled carpet-manufacturers pick up the jargon of antiquity! "I come to you, first of all; I have as yet said nothing to Miss Blessington, as it would never be agreeable to me to marry any man's daughter against or indeed without his full consent; I preferred to ask for yours before I gave entire liberty to my own wishes."

No words could have been more happily chosen than were these for the purpose which the speaker of them had in view. They conceded two points of immense consequence in the eyes of the Worcestershire squire. One point was that nobody had a right to marry or even court his daughter without his consent. The other was that not even a Peer of the realm with a rent-roll of eighty thousand a year had a right to presume as a matter of course that the consent would be given.

"You take me entirely by surprise," said the father "in what you are now telling

me, and it is only natural that I should be taken by surprise, considering that you have done nothing to arouse the smallest suspicion as to your views. I can only say that I thoroughly agree with your notion of how these matters ought to be conducted, and that I appreciate your honourable feeling. As far as I am concerned, Rendover, you know I can have no objection in the world. I don't mind saying that I should be very happy to see your wishes satisfied, and I wish you success with all my heart. More than that I cannot say. I should no more think of thrusting a husband on a daughter of mine than, I am sure, you would wish to be thrust upon her. But, considering the circumstances, I don't think, Rendover, you would need such aid with a woman."

And the frank, hearty old squire looked at Lord Rendover admiringly, and his brave blue eyes already twinkled with pleasure at the thought that his dear, good, beautiful Gertrude had in store for her what, as a

true English gentleman, he thought one of the highest rewards female loveliness and virtue could meet with—a well-supported peerage.

“I thank you very sincerely for your kindness, Blessington, I assure you. You give me all I should think of asking. If you agree with me, I think you had better say nothing—at least as yet—to Miss Blessington. I need hardly say that my admiration and love for her are complete; but I do not for a moment suppose that she cares much for me. I have never yet tried to make her do so; not thinking it honourable to do even that much without first apprizing you of my feelings. Now I have your permission to do my best?”

“Certainly, my dear Rendover, you have.”

“Then I will leave you now. I must go home and dress for the Chancellor’s dinner. I suppose you remain in town?”

“Yes, for the rest of the season.”

“That’s all right. Good-bye, then.”

And leaving the squire to join the file of riders in front of him, still composed pretty much as it had been twenty minutes ago, Lord Rendover, followed by his groom, cantered down the Row, and so home to Park Lane.

Not even the historian can be in two places at the same time. But whilst all the foregoing talk was being held, Lady Brakecliffe and Mrs. Blessington were having their conversation, as the carriage of the latter whirled brightly along the less crowded part of the park.

“Quite satisfied,” her ladyship was saying. “We are all of us quite satisfied. The Morrisses have behaved exceedingly well. Of course there is no necessity for your repeating it; but from an old friend like you I do not keep any secrets. Twenty thousand pounds settled upon Guinivere, and certain other arrangements with regard to Grantley’s share in the business, in case of his death, equally satisfactory.”

“Very handsome indeed,” said Mrs. Blessington; “very handsome.”

"You know there is often considerable difficulty in dealing with that class of people. Merchants will tell you that they cannot take their money out of what they call the concern. They get so large a profit by it in trade."

"That they must, I am sure, considering the price of silks and everything, and what they are really worth."

"Yes, and then of course they cannot understand and are not governed by the same chivalrous and unmercenary feelings which operate upon us, who have owned the soil for generations."

"Quite so," echoed Mrs. Blessington.

"Still I must say that the Morrises have behaved exceedingly well. The entire firm has felt the lustre that Grantley's marriage has shed on the whole family; and therefore he has probably been allowed to withdraw some of his capital for the purpose. At any rate, Guinivere has got what was only her due—a most handsome establishment and plenty of money."

"I have heard their house, and everything connected with it, is perfect."

"And it really is, I assure you," said Lady Brakecliffe. "I can only say I hope you will do as well for dear Gertrude."

"That can hardly be expected," said Mrs. Blessington, modestly. She had not the pride of the squire, but she had ten times his tact. "She is the daughter of blood as old as any in England; but still she is only the daughter of a commoner."

"I am the last person in the world, my dear Mrs. Blessington, to depreciate what our admirable Constitution, and indeed our religion, teaches us to consider as advantages. Still, as you say, Gertrude has blood, blood of the very best, and beauty of the highest order, to which my dear Guinivere's cannot be compared."

"Guinivere is exceedingly pretty," said Mrs. Blessington. "I am sure I never heard but one opinion on the subject."

The two old ladies seemed to be vying with each other in saying kind things. But

Lady Brakecliffe was not to be outdone in pretty compliments. She wanted information; and she knew that the only two ways of getting it out of any of her sex are either by pleasing them very much, or by putting them into a passion.

“I am sure it is very kind of you to say so, and I will not pretend that my darling child has not been very much favoured by nature. But Gertrude’s beauty is quite another thing. It is of the very grandest kind, my dear Mrs. Blessington. There is no girl in London like her, to my thinking. She ought to make a most excellent match. Is it true that Mr. Chichester Fleetwood is paying her attention? Everybody says so. I hope I do not offend you by the question. You know the interest I take in dear Gertrude, and——”

“My dear Lady Brakecliffe, not in the least. It is the most natural question in the world.”

“And everybody is asking it. Otherwise, I am sure——”

"You need not make any excuses, I assure you," said Mrs. Blessington. "It must be quite evident that Mr. Fleetwood admires Gertrude very much. Indeed—though this is strictly between ourselves, for I have not mentioned it even to Mr. Blessington—he has said as much to me."

"Has he indeed? Well, I quite expected it. Tell me: is he a man of very considerable property?"

"Considerable would scarcely be the word. He is not a wealthy man, but I should think he has seven or eight thousand a year."

"As much as that! How does he come by it? I always understood that the late Mr. Fleetwood, his uncle, spent what little there was left out of the old estates, and that Fleetwood Manse was heavily encumbered."

"So it was. But don't you know Chichester Fleetwood's history?"

"Not very accurately. I have heard a long story, but don't remember what it was exactly."

"Oh, don't you? Then I must tell you. I thought everybody knew it. Of course you know how, when his uncle, the late Mr. Fleetwood, came into the property, he found it almost hopelessly encumbered, and how, instead of trying to make things better, he made them very much worse."

"Yes, I know all that," said Lady Brakecliffe. "They are distant connexions of my mother's family, are the Fleetwoods, and I remember, as a girl, hearing of their ruinous habits."

"Well, the present Chichester Fleetwood began life just like the rest of them. He ought to have had a fine property, and he had not a penny; or if he had, nobody knew where it came from; but he knocked about London just as if he had thousands. People said he gambled, and there is no doubt he did."

"There was nothing against his honour, I suppose?"

"Oh, not a word, my dear Lady Brakecliffe, not a syllable. Everybody gambled

in those days, when he was a young man."

"I suppose he is about eight-and-forty?"

"About that. I am speaking of fifteen years ago. Just at that time—I remember it, because dear Gertrude was about seven years old—we all heard that young Chichester Fleetwood had won fifteen or twenty thousand at some German table or other. I think it was at Ems. He had won it quite fairly; there never was a whisper to the contrary. But all at once he disappeared; people said he was travelling, but nobody knew where."

"Yes, I remember hearing all that, now that you mention it."

"Well, just as his uncle died, utterly beggared, having got rid of all the Fleetwood estates as far as he could, and mortgaged what remained to its utmost value, Chichester Fleetwood returned to England."

"He was the heir, was he not?"

"Yes. But heir to what? Only to Fleet-

wood Manse, the park, and a very moderate-sized farm. These were mortgaged to the extent of fifty thousand pounds, and were in the market. Mr. Chichester Fleetwood bought them, and at once paid off the mortgages."

"But where did the money come from?"

"That is precisely the interesting part of the story. He made no secret of it, but told it in the frankest manner. He had been everywhere, he said; in Egypt, India, America, Australia, China, Japan, everywhere. He had left Europe with the settled determination to turn his winnings in Germany into a handsome fortune, and then to come back and re-establish the Fleetwood name."

"But how did he succeed in doing so?"

"He very nearly failed; for, twice over, his twenty thousand pounds were reduced to five. He tried the gold diggings, he said, and was nearly ruined. But he began again, and again. It was in China, however, that he at last succeeded. Any of the

Morris could tell you all about it. Underhill, Morris, and Underhill know all that is going on, all over the world, of that sort. He made two hundred thousand pounds in China in five years—all by speculating and lending his money to other speculators. They say it is the easiest thing in the world,” said Mrs. Blessington. “At any rate, he did it, and came home just in time to find his uncle dead, and what remained of the property put up for sale.”

“What a pity he could not save more of it!”

“He says he is very glad he could not; he would not care to be bothered with the management of a large property. He is quite satisfied to have saved the old place, which has been in the hands of the Fleetwoods for generations.”

“How very remarkable! Though, of course, there is no reason why he shouldn’t have made a large fortune out in those places, just as I suppose other people do,” said Lady Brakecliffe.

"None whatever," said Mrs. Blessington; "indeed, I think it was quite providential—though I must say I do not approve of gambling—I think it was quite providential, his winning that money at Ems—if it was Ems—and so being enabled to save the honour of a good old family."

"Quite so. A striking instance of providential interference. I think we must be going homewards, must we not?"

"Yes, it is after seven."

"Home, then, James."

And the two old ladies continued their conversation. It has, however, no further interest for us. Meanwhile the park was getting empty. Mrs. Grantley Morris and Miss Blessington were riding slowly homewards, with no other companions than Gertrude's father and Guinivere's husband. The two gentlemen had dropped behind.

"How very amusing Mr. Carryngton is!" said Guinivere. "Was he not good about the members of the House of Commons?"

"Very amusing indeed; he always is. He

is worth a dozen or a hundred of the stupid men one sees about."

"That he is. Do you know he thinks such a great deal of you?"

"Does he, dear? I am sure you think he does, and that everybody does; but it all resolves itself into your own dear foolish affection for me."

"No, no, Gertrude, indeed it does not. I heard him speak of you, and I can tell you what he said."

"Well, what did he say, then?" said Gertrude, making believe to humour her friend's wish to tell her, yet anything but unwilling to hear what it was.

"He said that you had what was uncommon in either a man or a woman, both imagination and—what do you call it?—a power of criticising. A critical faculty: that was it. I took notice of it, because I thought it so true."

"Of course you did, you dear deluded creature. If he had said that I had wings, you would have thought that equally true."

"No, I should not; but I am sure the other is, and I am quite certain that Mr. Carryngton said so."

"He said so, or something like it, because he knew you were my friend. I will bet anything you told him you knew me."

"Of course I did. I told him, as I tell everybody, that you are my dearest friend. What more natural?"

"And then he said what he did say in order to please you."

"Not in the least, I am sure. Other people were present, and it was said as much to them as to me."

"Who were present?" asked Gertrude.

"Mrs. Underhill, with whom I was staying, and Mrs. Atwell Underhill, on whom we went to call."

"Oh, *that* horror? I cannot understand Mr. Carryngton liking her."

"Perhaps he does not; he is a friend of her husband very likely."

"And of hers too," said Gertrude, ho-

nestly, "I am sure. What were *you* doing there at all?"

"Mrs. Underhill took me, and we found Mr. Carryngton there."

"He came to call, I suppose?"

"No, we found him there. Mrs. Underhill seemed a little astonished, but Mrs. Atwell certainly said that he had been staying there; at least, he had been to the theatre with them, and had spent the night at their house—Jessamine Lodge, I think they call it."

"How long since was it that you called there?"

"Let me see. I was staying, as I say, at Baxtreth. It must be five, six—oh, I should think, two months ago. It would be just after you left London to go down to Worcestershire."

Gertrude was going to reply, but she checked herself. What she was on the point of saying she contented herself with thinking; and it was to this effect. That it was not after she had gone down to

Worcestershire, but just before it. In fact, it was the day after the evening she had seen Mr. Carryngton at the Pall Mall Theatre, and he had come from Mrs. Atwell Underhill's box to speak to her and her mamma, and had then gone back again.

"I told you he was a friend of hers, and I am sure of it. I think it is a great pity; for she is a most objectionable woman."

This was Gertrude's outspoken way of expressing a strong conviction. Guinivere's opinions were less decided upon all matters, and she had a more feeble, hesitating mode of uttering them. Accordingly she joined weakly in chorus with—

"I did not think her very nice, I must say."

But she did not add a word about Godiva's audacious way of flaunting Carryngton in their faces, nor of the flowers, nor of Mrs. Underhill's indignation. She usually poured out her full little heart to Gertrude. But she had some judgment, and no end of goodness withal; and nothing

could have betrayed her into being a mischief-maker. Thus the two bosom friends had somewhat controlled their frankness during their talk; and their talk had been about Percy Carryngton.

He had some time since left the lingering array of riders, and was passing quietly along the railings on the north side of the Park, with a loose rein and apparently occupied thoughts.

"How are you, Percy, old boy?"

It was Atwell Underhill, who, though on foot, had overtaken him, and had evidently been walking fast.

"Hallo! Where do you come from?"

"I have been making a call at Bayswater, and am going home to dinner. Come on and dine with us, will you?"

"No, I can't to-day, thanks. You're not looking your best, Atwell? Are you seedy? Or is it only the heat?"

"I have been rather out of sorts, but it's nothing."

He looked anything but well. Indeed,

Carryngton had never seen him look so pale and fagged.

"I've been bothered about that matter, you know."

"But I thought you said it was all settled."

"So it is now, as far as it can be called a settlement. I've got one creditor instead of a dozen, if that's all. But I don't see how he's to be paid any more than the rest."

"I think I do, though. As I told you, we'll transfer the debt from him to an insurance company. They will lend you the money to pay him off, and you will have to insure your life with them for double the amount, and they will give you so many years to pay off the money borrowed."

"Yes, but how about the security? They will want somebody, indeed two people, to go security for the money being repaid in the time specified."

"I am going to see to that," answered

Carryngton. "I will be one of the securities, and we'll find another somehow, if necessary."

"My dear Percy——"

"Yes, yes, I know all that," said Carryngton, gathering up his bridle. "But never mind it. Go and make yourself happier and your mind easier, and get up a better look. Best regards to your wife."

"Good-bye, dear old boy!" said Atwell, with tears in his eyes. "Do come and see us soon at the Lodge."

"Trust me for that. Take care of yourself."

And off he cantered.

CHAPTER IV.

LORD RENDOVER BAITs A TRAP.

WELL, Thornton, what news from Leverstoke?" asked Lord Rendover, coming down the staircase of his own house, which he was evidently on the point of leaving, and finding his servant in the hall, just returned from a long journey. "Come into my study, and tell me all about it. What is the exact state of things?"

"Not very promising, my lord," answered Thornton.

"How is that?" asked his lordship, sitting down at his writing desk and opening some letters which had arrived by the last post. "How is that? Tell me all about it."

"Well, you see, my lord, so much has

been done by the other side already. The ground is occupied, my lord."

"But I knew that before I sent you," answered his lordship, still opening and reading the letters, treating both them and Thornton's information as matters of so little consequence as to be capable of being considered at the same time. "You don't mean to tell me that it is utterly impossible to carry the place against them?"

"Perhaps not, my lord, absolutely impossible. Nothing would be impossible, probably, to your lordship. But it will be very difficult and expensive."

"Difficult and expensive! I knew that already. I don't care for the expense at all; and were there no difficulty, there would be no expense. I want to know if they say it would be impossible."

"Not quite impossible, my lord. But they say it would cost thousands, and even then not be absolutely certain."

"How many thousands? Ten, fifteen; how many?"

"More than that, my lord."

"Twenty?"

"Just about, my lord," answered Thornton. "Nobody else would think of trying it. Of those who could not be bought at any price, the other side has a clear majority of a hundred and sixty. These are the figures which the agent gave me."

Lord Rendover did not rise, nor did he take the paper offered to him with any outward signs of anxiety. But anybody could have seen that, himself despite, he fixed his eye on it with very different interest from that with which he had been reading the now opened letters, and gave it very different attention from that which he had given to Thornton's oral information.

"Voters," he read aloud, "seven hundred and seventy-three. Voters that could not be bought, five hundred and ten. Of these, three hundred and thirty-five sure to vote for Fleetwood; one hundred and seventy-five would vote against him, if any Whig candidate were to stand. Majority for Fleetwood,

one hundred and sixty. Voters who *could* be bought, but the price would have to be very heavy, and they would rather be bribed by the other side, two hundred and sixty-three. In order to get a majority of one, two hundred and twelve of these must be secured by us, if the other side get the rest. Price from eighty to hundred pounds each. Cost, at a hundred, twenty thousand pounds odd."

Having finished the reading of the document, Lord Rendover folded it and put it in his breast pocket.

"Very clear and business-like statement. On the whole, not unsatisfactory. The thing is quite possible, but not certain. All depends on the doing of it."

"He seems to be very popular there, my lord, does Mr. Fleetwood."

"I dare say he is," said his lordship, rising. "I suppose they are not expecting any opposition ; not dreaming of it, eh?"

"Not in the least, my lord. And I told the agent not to breathe a word about it to anybody in Leverstoke."

"Quite right. I should think you are tired, Thornton. You had better go and have something to eat."

"Thank you, my lord, I am, just a little. It's a thirteen hours' journey altogether, and I came straight."

"Very well. I shall not be home for dinner probably. Here is a letter for Mr. Percy Carryngton. He will be calling about four o'clock. Give it him when he does. It is important."

"Yes, my lord. Is your lordship going out? I don't think the carriage is at the door, my lord."

"No, I don't want it. Send out for a Hansom."

About an hour and twenty minutes later, Lord Rendover descended from a carriage of the down train at Windsor, stepped across the platform to where a groom was waiting for him with a single horse, mounted, and rode off alone. He took the high road which strikes through Windsor Forest, in the direction of Bracknell. It was a

warm lovely day, as yet but about half-past three, and almost the sultriest point of the afternoon.

He rode slowly therefore, but without seeming to be much distracted by the beautiful woodland tract that lay on either side of him. His only object seemed to be to ride in the shade, make as little dust as possible, and commune entirely with his own thoughts.

He had gone about six miles, and it was about a quarter before five, when he turned off the high road, taking a leafy meandering lane that, after moving irresolutely from side to side, at last seemed to refuse to go any further, but stopped short at the entrance to a pretty rural garden, at the further extremity of which was a picturesque little cottage, guarded by well-grown walnut trees. It was such a home as might satisfy the wants of him who turns from grandeur without wishing to break altogether with elegance and comfort.

Under the walnut trees a girl was sitting

and reading. She was very, very pretty; but as her good looks had scarcely any affinity with a higher type than that of perfect prettiness, she would have looked more pretty had she looked less serious and less sad. Looking on it, you felt that it was a face that ought to have been always dimpled with smiles and sparkling with joy. As it was, it was shorn of the natural accompaniments of its own beauty, without gaining from melancholy any of that loveliness which melancholy sometimes gives to the grander order of feminine feature.

She rose as Lord Rendover approached. Their greeting was such as you may often see exchanged between people who by their position are supposed, and ought to be fond of each other, and yet who are not. Lord Rendover seemed willing to make up for the absence of the reality by well-bred pretence; but her simple manner made it difficult for him to do so.

"Have you ridden down?" she said.
"Was it not very hot?"

"It was, rather; but I rode very slowly all the way."

"I hope David did not keep you waiting at the station."

"Not a moment. I found him there when the train arrived."

"I told him to be very particular not to be late."

"Thank you. Have you been out much this last week?"

"Two or three times. But it is too hot to ride in the middle of the day. I ride in the evening a little."

"Why are you not out now?" he asked, but quickly added—"I forgot; David, of course, is not here. I am sorry you should have been kept at home on my account. Had I known, I would not have taken him away. I would have driven from Windsor."

"But I should have stayed in, in any case, when I knew you were coming."

"Thanks, Jessie. But to tell the truth, I came in order to go and make a visit

a couple of miles the other side of Bracknell."

To this she made no reply. After a short pause he asked her—

"Why do you never go out early in the morning? It must be so delightful here about sunrise. You said you were fond of getting up early. Have you lost your taste for it."

"Not at all. I am always dressed by seven, at the very latest."

"Then why not ride then?" he asked.

"It is too early for the horses."

"Who says so?"

"David says so," she answered, quietly.

"David means it is too early for *him*, the lazy rascal. I must see to that. Why did you not tell me of it before?"

"Because it is of no consequence. I would much rather you said nothing about it. I really do not care."

"But you ought to care. It's absurd of you, not caring. I leave you here, in my absence, complete mistress of everybody

and everything, and you should see that they all do their duty."

She simply raised her eyes and looked at him a moment, then withdrew them and said nothing.

"Why don't you wear something nicer than that, Jessie?" he said, with a tone of irritation in his voice. She was not looking at him, but she knew his eyes were directed to her dress.

It was a pretty, but plain calico dress, faultlessly made, and put on with care, such as, if worn at breakfast, could have provoked no one's, criticism, save in the form of praise.

"Is it not nice enough? I thought it was very pretty. But I will wear it no more if you object to it."

"I do not object to it in the least," he said, the irritation in his voice growing more perceptible. Her submission annoyed him, as a certain form of female submission invariably annoys men. "The dress is well enough at its proper time. But it is now

five in the afternoon, and you might have something on more suitable, especially as you say you knew I was coming. If you stop at home on that account, you might, at least, dress yourself for it."

"I will do whatever you wish in the matter," she answered.

"Very well. Then do so. And why do you never wear any of the things I gave you? You have no rings, no bracelets, no anything on."

"I do not like jewellery," she answered.

"You used not to dislike it, one time."

"I never was particularly fond of it."

"You used to wear it, at any rate," he said, argumentatively.

"I will wear it again, if you insist upon it."

"How can I *insist* upon it? I should like you to do so. That is all."

"Then I will do so, since you particularly desire it." She rose as she said this. "Shall I go and dress now? I might as well."

“Do so, then, and I will stay here whilst you do.”

He sat down on the garden-chair which she had quitted, took up the book which she had been reading, looked at it, threw it down again, drew from his pocket the written statement which he had received from Thornton concerning the electoral list at Leverstoke, and began to study it closely. By-and-by, he sought for a pencil in his pocket-book, commenced making figures of his own and entering into minute calculations, sometimes uttering them aloud.

“Yes, that is just about what it amounts to,” he said at length, replacing the paper and the pencil in his pocket. “The thing will be expensive, and not absolutely certain with all the expense in the world. But it is quite possible. It only wants a clever, pleasant, popular candidate, and a discreet but bold agent. Percy’s just the man for the first. By Jove! how it will astonish Fleetwood! He thinks he has the game in his hands, and is making all the running.

We shall see before long. Oh, here you are!"

She had returned, and was walking towards him. She had on a delicate muslin dress of a late pattern, and of the most fashionable make; and she wore trinkets and rings, in which there was more value and taste than display. Still they were very observable. To some eyes, indeed, she would not have seemed improved by the change of costume. But they would not have been the eyes of people habituated to the dress of large cities, and on whom habit had wrought its usual impressions and results.

"Oh, here you are!" he said, rising. "Yes, that is quite a different thing. Now you look as you ought to look. It is every way charming, faultless. Nothing could be better."

"I am glad you like it," she answered. But anybody might have seen that she had at last been forced to say something she did not mean.

"I must go on, now. What time is it? Just twenty minutes to six. I don't quite know what time I shall be back, and I want you, Jessie, to be kind enough, in my absence, to entertain a cousin of mine who will be coming down some time this evening in order to see me. His name is Mr. Car-ryngton."

"Is it absolutely necessary that I should see him?" she asked.

"Absolutely necessary! What do you mean by absolutely necessary? I shall not attempt to compel you, you may be quite sure. But I shall be very much obliged to you if you will do so. What earthly objection can you have to doing it?"

"I would rather not, if I may choose. That is all."

"Do you know him?"

"No; I never even heard his name before, that I know of."

"Of course, if you wont, you wont, and there's an end of the matter. But it will seem rather rude to him; and the rudeness

will appear to be far more mine than yours. I suppose he can amuse himself in some sort of way, if you positively refuse to try to entertain him till I return. But it will seem strange."

"But I have not refused. I will do what I can, though I should think he would be much better able to amuse himself than I to amuse him. About what time will he be coming?"

"I really do not know. He is coming from town."

"Have *you* not come from town?" she asked.

"Yes, but I could not wait to see him; so I left word for him to come here after me. Good-bye, Jessie. And make yourself pleasant to Mr. Carryngton. You will find him very agreeable."

"What time will you be back?" she asked, anxiously, far more anxiously than he had heard her ask such a question for many a long day. "In an hour? or an hour and a half?"

“Not later than eight,” he said, seeming perfectly indifferent to her anxiety, since probably guessing its cause, and walking towards the stable to remount his horse.

“How well she looks! If she would be a little bit cheerier. I wonder what he will think of her.” He looked at his watch. “My word, I must be off. He will be here soon.”

He trotted down the lane up which he had come, and on reaching the high road, turned to the right in the direction of Bracknell. There was nothing, as yet, coming up the other way.

CHAPTER V.

WILL CARRYNGTON BE CAUGHT?

AT about half-past four that same afternoon Percy Carryngton arrived in haste at Park Lane, and rang and knocked both loudly and hurriedly at the front door of his cousin's house.

"Where is Lord Rendover? In his study?"

"No, sir," said Thornton. "His lordship went out a couple of hours ago."

Carryngton had already got to the other end of the hall, and was at the foot of the staircase. He turned round suddenly.

"Are you sure? He sent me word he particularly wanted to see me."

"Yes, sir, and my lord has left a letter for you. This is it, sir."

Percy opened it impatiently and read. It expressed regret that Rendover was unable to wait for him in town, and begged him to come down after the writer into the country. It gave full directions as to the trains from London, and for finding the spot where Percy had to go. On no account, it said, must he fail to come; for Rendover wanted to see him on a matter of importance.

Carryngton looked at his watch, re-entered his Hansom, and in another hour and a half was at the Windsor Station. Here he took an open hackney carriage, and was soon driving along the road on which Lord Rendover had preceded him two hours and a half ago on horseback.

But it was now drawing towards sunset. The heat of the day was over, and the woods to the left hand protected the traveller against the horizontal rays, which fell pleasantly across the road, filtered through cool green leaves.

The carriage was an easy one, the pace was moderate but exceedingly even; and the hour and the scene and the solitude, all compelled Carryngton to surrender himself passively to whatsoever thoughts were most pleasurable and least exacting.

There was nothing exacting and much that was pleasurable in thoughts of Gertrude Blessington. He had seen her twice since we beheld him one of many gentlemen-in-waiting around her in Rotten Row, and it was but ten days since the date of that apparently unmomentous event. Moreover, on each of the two subsequent occasions, as little had occurred as at the preceding one. For all that, he did not now regard her quite as indifferently as when, issuing from his cousin's house, he had puffed at his cigar, and said, "Good-bye, then, to Beauty Blessington!"

Every time he saw her, he cared more to see her; and every time he left her, he went away with a higher estimate of her. When we are prepared to be touched, very little

will touch us. And he had been considerably touched by the way in which she had come to his rescue in the Row, against the awkward assailant who had hinted that society would not care to have him back if he once had the bad taste to leave it.

More and more too was he beginning to suspect that he had been hasty in assuming for certain that when Lord Rendover had spoken of his probably marrying, he had meant to convey the information, indeed the warning, that he meant to marry Miss Blessington. It was nearly three months since that had occurred, and he could still see no signs of Rendover making court to her.

But if Rendover was not doing so, Chichester Fleetwood was. That, Carryngton could see plainly enough. And he began to ask himself if it would not be a thousand pities that he himself should forego his chance of winning her by a mistake, and let Fleetwood quietly walk in and step off with the prize.

So he really had begun to think of Miss

Blessington in connexion with an attempt of his own to marry her. It looked like it.

But as he neared the spot where, by virtue of the directions given in Rendover's letter, he knew he must be approaching his journey's end, he began once more to wonder what his cousin could want him for so urgently. He could make a pretty shrewd guess, both by the directions in the note and by the neighbourhood itself, as to what was the nature of the cottage whither he was wending his way, and he therefore felt that it must be something of considerable consequence which could induce his cousin to give him an appointment at a place of which he had never before heard mention.

He had made up his mind that it must probably be in connexion with his own political prospects ; and so believing, his thoughts became a little more active than they had been during the first part of the drive. And he was mentally addressing an attentive House, when the driver broke in upon his imaginary oratory with the remark :—

"I think this must be the turning, sir!"

Percy stood up in the carriage and looked about him. He had not been taking much note of the road; but as the carriage had never turned right or left, there was not much to perplex him.

"We passed the seventh mile-stone, a good bit since, sir."

"And how many turnings have there been since?"

"Two, sir; one to the right, and one to the left."

"This must be it, then. Try, at any rate."

They tried, and they were right, coming to the same dead stop as Lord Rendover had come, but having the cottage plainly before them. Percy felt sure this was where he should find his cousin.

He left the carriage at the gate, and walked up the centre gravel-path to the house. As he was close upon it, a young and pretty girl in a muslin dress came through the open front-door, down the

small white steps that led to it from the garden.

She did not notice his approach till she was on the last step of all. Then she stopped. But she could not possibly retire. He raised his hat.

"I am seeking Lord Rendover. Am I right in expecting to find him here?"

"It is Mr. Carryngton, is it not?" she said, very timidly.

"Yes, I am Lord Rendover's cousin," he answered, seeing that she was nervous and ill at ease, and hoping that the information would help to reassure her. "I got this note from him this afternoon, begging me to come down here to see him at once. He is here then, I conclude, for I came without delay."

"He has been here this afternoon, and he will be here again this evening; but he is not here at present. And he——"

Percy thought she was going to faint. Her colour had been coming and going, and she had been stammering over these

words, as though she would never get them out. At the last words "and he," she came to a full stop as though she was going no further. He saw the seats under the walnut trees close to; and he immediately turned them to account.

"May I sit down, if Lord Rendover is not here? I am a little tired; and after the dust of the road, the trees are so pleasant."

She was glad to avail herself of his suggestion. There was no necessity for moving either of the chairs. But he lifted one of them from the ground, and set it down again, but a little further off the other one than it had been before he touched it. Perhaps this attention, and the way it was performed, as also the time which had thus been gained, had served to calm her nerves a little.

"He told me that he was expecting you," she continued with more self-possession, yet still anything but mistress of herself; "and asked me to try to—to entertain you till he returned."

"There will be no difficulty about that," he answered, kindly and courteously, but with no intonation that could possibly be construed into a stupid compliment. "Have you any idea what time my cousin will be back?"

"He said he did not know precisely, though I asked him particularly in order that I might be able to tell you. But he said he should not be later than eight o'clock, at the latest. Can you stay?"

How she hoped he would say he could not! But her hope was not to be gratified.

"Perfectly well. Back at eight"—he looked at his watch—"and it is now seven. I must catch the twenty minutes past ten train at Windsor; that is all. Till then I am free; allowing of course a good hour from this to Windsor."

"He is sure to be back long before then," she said.

"No doubt. He knows that I shall have to go back to London by that train, for we have a big ball in town to-night."

"And you must be there! Wont that make you very late?"

He was a little astonished at the simplicity of her question.

"No. I shall be able to be there between twelve and one, and that will be quite soon enough for the purpose."

"And he knows that you must be back for it?"

"Yes, he knows that I thought he would be there himself."

"Very likely he will," she answered. "You can both go up together."

How pretty she was, how immensely pretty! And yet, to all appearance, how unsophisticated! Her nervousness, her confusion, her ignorance, gave her an immediate interest in Carryngton's eyes, which her looks alone would not have caused; though operating with these other causes, they too had their effect.

"Do you know so little of our London habits," he asked, "as to think that midnight would be too late to go to a dance?"

"I do not know London at all," she answered. "I never was there but once, and then only in going from one railway station to another. It is very big, is it not? It seemed so to me."

"Enormous. Too big, in fact. I declare I think you have the best of it down here. This is charmingly pretty."

"I am glad you like it, though I have seen country that I like better than this; wilder, I mean; grander."

"That you may easily have seen. This is lovely, nothing more. There is nothing fine about it. But it is very charming."

"Yes, it is; but I like high hills and the sound of water. This is too tame. One gets tired of it sometimes."

He did not like to ask what grander scenery she referred to. He felt it better to let these impersonal commonplaces go on, in order that she might be still more at her ease with him. At present, it was evident that she was talking to him because she thought it her duty to do so. Consequently, like

all nervous people in such situations, she dreaded a pause more than anything else, and kept up the dialogue for the mere sake of keeping it up. He tried to seem to be as little interested in her as possible, for fear of disturbing her; but she did interest him very much, for all that.

"I wonder he does not come. He said eight, at the latest."

"It is only half past seven as yet. There is yet half-an-hour."

"I never offered you anything," she said, with returning nervousness, as though she did not quite know whether she ought to offer it or not. Neither did she know what to offer. "Would you not like something, and what would you prefer?"

"What should you take if I were not here? Do you dine early?"

"Nearly always; about half-past one," she answered.

"Then perhaps you take tea about this time?" he suggested.

"Well, I do. But I do not care about it. Would you like——some wine?"

"No, I would much rather have tea, if you will let me. And may I ask a favour, if it is not disagreeable?"

"Certainly." And she paused, for she had risen from her seat as though she was going at once to see about tea.

"May we have tea out here?" he asked. "Coming from London, I should enjoy it so much. It would seem so thoroughly rural."

"Oh, yes. I often take it out here myself."

"Alone?" he asked, unguardedly.

"Yes, alone," she answered equally unguardedly. She was so nervous in reality still, that she would probably have answered any question he might have put to her. "With whom should I take it? I will go and order it to be brought out at once."

"To tell the truth," said Carryngton, stopping her again. "I am very hungry. I usually dine at this hour; and I came

away in such a hurry from London that I ate nothing before starting."

He might have added that he had fully expected at the end of his journey to find not only his cousin, but dinner also. But of course, he was not so frank as all that.

"I am sorry," she said, with real sympathy in her voice. "I really beg your pardon for not asking you if you were not hungry. Would you rather wait till something was got ready for you, or would you rather have what there is ready, at once."

"I would much sooner have what there is—anything will do, I assure you—and some tea. Thanks, so much."

She was off in a moment, leaving him to his own thoughts, which were, like the circumstances, curious enough. Very shortly, however, a maid-servant brought out a table, laid out with good promise; and soon she herself reappeared. Her nervousness had a good deal worn off; perhaps it would be juster to say that a vague nervousness

had been exchanged for a definite anxiety that his wants should be properly seen to.

"But this is both delightful and sumptuous," he said; "I am delighted that I did not dine in London."

He ate so heartily that she began eating too. A touch of nature was breaking down the barriers between them. Two people cannot eat and drink together without growing more or less friendly in manner, unless they insist upon sulking altogether. Still he noticed that she maintained a dignified behaviour, all the more conspicuous now that she was no longer so afraid of him and of the situation.

"The very pleasantest meal I ever had in England," he said, when it was over; "I remember nothing like it since I gave up travelling. And you do this every day, you say?"

"Nearly every day, now that it is so fine."

"How I envy you! Rendover ought to be back by this time—it must be eight. By Jove! it's half-past!"

"You don't say so! I wonder he has not returned."

"Do you know at all where he has gone to?"

"The other side of Bracknell, I understood him to say."

For the first time there was a pause. She saw that he was thinking, and she was now sufficiently accustomed to him to remain silent. At length she thought he looked as if he wanted something.

"Do you smoke?" she ventured to suggest. "If you want, please do so. Have you any cigars? Perhaps——"

"Thank you, yes; I have some." And he pulled out his case. "But are you quite sure that smoking does not annoy you?"

"Not in the least; I have always been accustomed to it."

He looked at her suddenly, and a little surprisedly. He little thought that she was thinking of the short pipe of the hump-backed schoolmaster, or the fumes of the

longer one of poor old Roger Barfoot. He lighted his cigar.

"What a lovely night! And to think one spends such nights as these in London! Are they all like this?" he asked.

"They have been lately. I never knew such a May. I sit out till one or two in the morning, listening to the nightingales."

"Do you?" he said. "And we are dancing and supping in crowded rooms. Strange, very strange!"

He had broken into a soliloquy which he had not intended. He immediately checked himself, and returned afresh to such talk as was possible between them. This was necessarily of an unimportant and every-day character. How could it be otherwise? They had never seen each other before. They would probably never see each other again. They had nothing in common to afford ground for interesting conversation. He knew nobody whom she knew except his cousin, and his cousin was the very person

about whom it would never have done for either of them to talk.

Still their talk, ordinary as it was, was not stupid. It would not bear setting-down for the perusal of people who want amusing, but it was not altogether dull to either of them. A certain amount of time had to be passed by them together, and they managed to pass it very tolerably. There is a great deal in manner. One man may talk to you of the weather, and another may not. This person will throw a charm round the height of the thermometer, whilst that one will with his halting periods rob Pompeii or Etruria of all its spell.

But the time passed, and still there was no Lord Rendover. It was a quarter to nine, and yet no sound of horses' feet could be heard coming along the lane.

"May I write a note to him?" asked Carryngton.

"Certainly; do you want to do so now?"

She rose and led the way into the house. He followed. As yet he had not been

inside it. They went into the first room on the left. It was small, pretty, commodious. Beyond that there was no remark to make. She brought him her desk, and placed it before him. It was in rather worse order even than women's writing materials usually are, and there was much less of them. He wrote his note and gave it to her.

"Will you kindly give this to my cousin, and say how sorry I was not to find him. I cannot conceive what has kept him."

"Neither can I, unless," she suggested, "the mare has gone lame."

"Perhaps, that may be it; but I fear I must go now in any case." And he held out his hand. "Thank you so much for your kindness."

"Not at all; I fear you have had a stupid two hours, and all for nothing. And I have only to give him this note?"

"That is all; and say how sorry I was to miss him. I see the fly is at the gate. Good-bye; and again, many thanks."

She was at the top of the steps that led

into the garden, and he had turned to go down them.

“Mr. Carryngton!”

He stopped and turned round again. Her hand was stretched out as if she was about to clutch hold of him, but she remained quite motionless.

“Yes—what is it? tell me.”

“Nothing; really nothing. I beg your pardon. Good-bye!”

“No, but tell me; I am sure you have something to say.”

“No, no; good-bye! I have not, indeed. I assure you I have not.”

“But you have, I know you have. Tell me, please. I shall be delighted to serve you in any way.”

“You will be late, I am sure you will be late. Go; do go. I have nothing to say to you, I assure you.”

It was in vain that again he offered, even tenderly, to serve her. In a fit of desperation she had got out the words, “Mr. Carryngton!” But she could go no further.

The very sound of her own voice and of his name had frightened all her resolve back again; she stood there now, only begging him to leave her.

He was obliged therefore to do so, with "good-bye" once more, and another shake of the hands. He passed down the little gravel-walk, got into the fly, and drove away in the twilight, wondering what Rendover had brought him down there for, and not liking his noble cousin any the better for what he had seen.

Meanwhile Jessie had returned to her seat under the walnut trees, and broken into a fit of passionate crying.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! What else can I do? He would not have believed me if I had told him. Nobody would believe me, nor Aunt Mary, nor Uncle Roger, nor anybody. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! I wish I were dead! I wish I had never—I wish——" And floods of redoubled tears drowned all the rest.

And then the nightingales commenced singing.

CHAPTER VI.

THREE IMPORTANT INTERVIEWS.

MR. BLESSINGTON'S town house was not in a sufficiently fashionable quarter of the West-end to have held its ground against the imputation of its pretensions being a little out of date, had it not been marked by peculiarities which gave it a special tone of its own. It stood behind and out of the way of three squares that would be very much outraged if they were called unfashionable, but they were at any rate the limits of that exclusive world.

The house had all the authority which attaches to a strong institution or character which, though surviving its time, attempts no compromise with this last, but boldly

affects to wait till its younger rivals shall have lost their transitory prestige. It stood completely alone, was girt by a high brick wall, and had a garden of its own at the back. It had once been in what, if still unchanged, would now be called the country. Streets, and squares, and mews had compassed it about; but it would lay aside none of its original ways. There it stood, an immovable protest against the mortar of yesterday.

The same could be said of its interior; its decorations, its furniture, were already historical. Only in its conservatory and its garden had it condescended to learn; and they had availed themselves of all the newest horticultural inventions and appliances.

It was the day after the events of the preceding chapter; a bright, warm, leafy second of June. The first visitor at Blessington House, as soon as visitors could well call, was a tall, handsome man, who asked to see Mrs. Blessington, and in reality

wanted to see only Mrs. Blessington. By calling thus early, he thought his wishes would be gratified.

It was Mr. Chichester Fleetwood. He was shown into the drawing-room, which was on the ground floor. He was certainly a strikingly handsome man, and despite far travel and freely-exerted energies, was not old-looking for his years. His hair was not very thick, but his whiskers and moustache were full, and his brown beard, yet unturned, was splendid. He looked every inch a gentleman. His ancestors had played a gallant part in the days when kings and kingly rule were fought for. And he seemed like one who would do as much again if such times could ever return.

His notions about politics were as confused and superficial as those of all but a very few people usually are. Accordingly, he called himself a Tory, for no other reason than because his forefathers had fought against the Puritans, and a lot of other people whom he disliked called them-

selves, for reasons no better than his own, Whigs or Liberals.

But why was he obliged to be a politician at all? Had he any taste or faculty urging him in that direction? None whatsoever. He hated crowded assemblies, thought other people's speeches a bore, and of his having to make one himself as something too terrible. Hewas perfectlysatisfiedwith everything just as it was, and wanted to forward no reform or crotchet, either in the House or out of it.

He wanted to sit in Parliament because he wanted to seem to be of some importance in the world, and because he wanted to marry Miss Blessington. The main-spring and secret of nearly all Chichester Fleetwood's actions, was that particular form of vanity which shows itself in exceeding sensitiveness to public opinion. He cared immensely what people thought of him. He was thoroughly honest and manly; but he was not satisfied with the unobtrusive position which unaided honesty and manliness confer.

It was this which had driven him, when a young man, to spend the little he had in the least possible time, and then to take to gambling in order to get some more quickly. He had no passion for play, but he had an inordinate passion for what successful play brought him. When at length, by a lucky coup, he won his twenty thousand pounds at Ems, he had wit enough to see that he had got hold of a sum which, if judiciously turned to account, would enable him to cut a brilliant figure for the rest of his life.

Twenty thousand pounds, played with, could be as quickly and easily lost as they had been quickly and easily won. Twenty thousand pounds, spent, would keep him going for four or five years, and that was all.

Why not devote ten years to turning it into ten times the sum, and then come back and be somebody for the rest of his life? He could not do this in England, or indeed in Europe. But the East or the West was fair ground for the noblest blood. We know

how he succeeded. He became lord of Fleetwood Manse.

That was something; but it was not enough. His craving for the approbation of such public opinion as he was acquainted with—the opinion of the fashionable and high social world—had increased, and his means for obtaining it were now very respectable. He found its opinion to be, that a seat in Parliament, merely as a seat in Parliament, was a distinguished thing. There was no necessity ever to make a speech in it, or introduce a bill, or take any initiative in it. It was sufficient to be able to pass beyond the lobby, and have M.P. put at the end of his name, to be a more important person, a person standing out in better and clearer relief than before. It was quite open to him, with his fortune, to accomplish this result. Accordingly he set to work and made arrangements therefor, and very shortly he was going to be returned for Leverstoke.

He also found it to be generally held by the aforesaid particular kind of public

opinion, that it was in itself a most distinguished thing for a man to marry a peeress, or a peer's daughter, or a girl with a very large fortune, or one whose beauty was town talk. It was an illustrious thing in a man, it made a man shine, to do any of these things, quite apart from the question how much love went into the doing of it. Such a union was so brilliant and shed such a halo round it, that people's eyes could not bear to look into it and examine its internal make and value. Like the sun, it was too dazzling for that. Accordingly Chichester Fleetwood resolved to make a "distinguished" marriage.

Money and blood he already had himself; and he had, it must be owned, a manly preference for beauty over mere title or superfluous jointure. He should like to marry a very beautiful girl. He would do so if he could. He saw Miss Blessington, and he came to the conclusion that he would do exceedingly well if he could contrive to marry *her*.

I hope nobody thinks meanly of this man. He was forty-eight, very vain, totally destitute of brilliant abilities, a man of the world, honest as the day, and exceedingly generous. Not a striking noble type of character, by any means, but reputed by judges a very good fellow.

Neither must it be supposed that he did not care for Miss Blessington. He cared a good deal for her. I should think it would be impossible for any man—not bad—to begin by wanting to marry such a girl as she was, and not end by liking her very considerably. He was not passionately in love with her, it is true. Had she suddenly caught the small-pox, he would certainly not have come on the errand which had brought him here this morning; but had she become his wife and then caught it, he would have clung to her with unflagging chivalry and devotion. In a word, he was a gentleman, but not very much more.

It was not long before Mrs. Blessington entered the room and showed by every sign

that she was exceedingly pleased to see him.

"I am so glad you have called early," she said.

"I fear it is very early; too early," he answered.

"Not at all, my dear Mr. Fleetwood. It is so pleasant to have a really good talk with one agreeable visitor and intimate friend, before a crowd of people one cannot care about arrive and make all genuine conversation impossible. And what is there fresh?"

Mrs. Blessington threw herself into a gossiping attitude, just as she had begun with a gossiping tone, as though she was fully expecting a good chat upon things in general. Her innocent air of pleased anticipation was done to perfection; but she knew well enough that she was about to have to listen to anything save mere gossip of the clubs and drawing-rooms.

"There is nothing very new," he answered; "but to tell the truth, Mrs. Blessington, I came this morning expressly to talk to you

about something which has the reputation of being very old, but which is nevertheless always new, both for men and women."

"Yes," said Mrs. Blessington, settling herself into rather a more stately attitude, and sobering her busily-inquisitive face down into a look of solemn and self-possessed expectancy.

"I came to tell you," he continued—"to tell you formally of what I think cannot have escaped your eye, both as woman and mother. I mean to announce to you, with your permission, my profound admiration for Miss Blessington, and my earnest desire to make her my wife."

Announcements of this kind can never be easy or agreeable to make, even when they are expected, and it is known that they are expected. The most self-confident man must feel something like awe when he asks for a thing which he knows he cannot insist upon being granted, and must ask for with coolness, moderation, and dignity. Chichester Fleetwood felt more comfortable

when he had got over the first and most difficult part of his statement, and instead of his own voice he heard Mrs. Blessington's.

"I am not altogether surprised," she said, "however much I must express myself flattered by what you have just told me."

"I think I had almost as much as given you to understand it," he said, as though to plead still further for a favourable reception of his formal declaration.

"Well, Mr. Fleetwood, cautious parents are not in a hurry to arrive at such conclusions; and I must say, for my part, that though I thought I saw you admired Gertrude, I really should not have been surprised if I had never heard a word from you on the subject."

"But I have been meditating it for a considerable time," he said.

"I can quite believe that, Mr. Fleetwood. Men, sensible men, do not proceed rashly in such important matters; I presume that you have not hinted anything of the kind to Gertrude?"

"Hinted is a word of so—so large a meaning, Mrs. Blessington, that I could not honestly say that I have not—hinted anything; but I have said nothing serious to Miss Blessington, you may be quite sure. I do not think that would have been just to you, who have always treated me with such kindness and favour."

"I have treated you, Mr. Fleetwood, as I felt toward you." He leaned forward in his chair and bowed his acknowledgments. "From me you will meet with no opposition whatsoever; of course I cannot speak positively for Mr. Blessington; but I should think that you will experience no opposition from him either. Nothing has passed between you on the subject, has there?"

"Nothing whatever. Of course I shall speak to him, and shall hope to satisfy him upon points on which ladies are sometimes supposed not to be consulted, but in which"—and here he smiled—"they are, I am sure, quite as much interested as we are."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Blessington, who

was exceedingly interested, and indeed anxious to hear what he had to say upon the subject.

“I may therefore just mention to you what I shall put more formally before my good friend your excellent husband, that I have an income of clear six thousand a year, and shall be ready to meet his wishes in regard to settlements in every possible way. Is he in town? I have not seen him lately.”

“He got back only late last night, and I myself have not seen him; he has been away nearly a fortnight; but you can see him at almost any time. With regard to Gertrude, however, I think I ought to caution you against haste or—impetuosity.”

“Certainly, Mrs. Blessington, certainly.”

“She is a most excellent daughter, and has a most amiable disposition; but she has views and opinions of her own, and when they are definitely formed they are very difficult to shake. I do not at all know the

state of her feelings; but I am quite sure that if any man proposed to her, and she once refused him, all his efforts afterwards to lead her to change her determination would be in vain. Therefore I strongly urge great caution; you will see that I can give this advice only in your interest."

"Thank you, very much, Mrs. Blessington, very much indeed. I will be guided entirely by you in the matter."

"You will do wisely, I assure you. And how are your election prospects going on? Perfectly well, I hope."

"Perfectly. Leverstoke is the safest place in the world; there will be no opposition; and I am only waiting for the vacancy, which must occur during the course of the summer."

"I am very glad to hear that; it is all in your favour. Without wishing to say that Gertrude is at all an ambitious girl, I am sure she would like to see her husband a distinguished man, and would not be insensible to his being such, even in an affair

of love. All these things tell, you know, with us women, Mr. Fleetwood."

"Of course they do, and ought to do."

"And a seat in Parliament is in itself a distinction, which justly carries with it great weight, even in an assault upon feminine affections; and I do not think anybody can blame us for it."

"Quite the contrary. It is one of a woman's virtues, my dear Mrs. Blessington, that she always looks favourably upon merit."

Perhaps Miss Blessington might have different notions from theirs as to what "distinction" and "merit" really are. They did not seem to suspect so however. And mother and would-be son-in-law parted, both very well pleased with themselves and with each other.

During this conversation, whose actual length we have considerably abbreviated, and which must have occupied a good three-quarters of an hour, only one other visitor had called. This had been Percy

Carryngton. Despite Mrs. Blessington's first clever affectation of complete ignorance as to their being any special motive for Chichester Fleetwood's early visit, she had, before entering the drawing-room, given instructions to the servant to say that she was engaged. Carryngton accordingly got this answer when he made his appearance very shortly afterwards.

But it so happened that through one open door, and then through another closed one of glass, he perceived that in the garden at the back of the house and at the further end of it, Miss Blessington and Mrs. Grantley Morris were sitting. He made bold to send the servant to ask if he might pay his respects to them where they were. The servant returned immediately, bringing an affirmative reply.

The two ladies had the last book upon African travel, but it had been laid down, though open, and had given way either to comments of their own, or to the discussion of matters nearer home. There

was no pretence of taking it up again, as he approached and received a welcome that assured him he had not presumed too far in asking to be allowed to join them.

"Mrs. Blessington is engaged. But I thought I might venture in here."

"Certainly. Mamma engaged! Oh, probably with papa, who came from the country late last night. Sit down, Mr. Carryngton."

He did so, and Mrs. Morris very soon rose as though she was going to leave them.

"Where are you going, Guinivere?"

"Only to look for the first volume of this, and verify the contradiction that we thought we had discovered, you remember."

"Never mind it now, dear. Is she not restless, Mr. Carryngton? Do try to amuse her. *I* never can, do what I will."

"Oh, Gertrude! How can you say so? I must pass a very stupid life then; for I certainly spend most of it with you."

"Because I make you. You cannot help it. I am a shocking tyrant, Mr. Carryngton, am I not? But then, you see, I

always have the latest literature, the best bonbons—will you have some?”—and she held out a box of preserved pistachios from Siraudin’s—“and tolerably good roses, for my slaves. And yet she wants to leave me. And the moment she chooses for her desertion is when, in addition to all these good things, there arrives for her——” And Miss Blessington finished her sentence only by a slight sweep of the hand towards the new comer.

“A fellow slave,” said Mrs. Morris, concluding the sentence for her. Carryngton moved assent. “Serfdom shared, like all other grief divided, is easier to bear.”

“And much less ignominious,” added Carryngton.

“If you both will have it so,” said Miss Blessington, determined not to be beaten, “when slaves enter, they usually bring something. What has the last one brought?”

“I bring a most humble petition and remonstrance from subjects who cannot

obtain private audience. Why were you not at the great ball, last night? We all expected you."

"Papa was away, and mamma was not well, and—and—I did not—though that is not the answer to give to the petitioners of whom you spoke—I did not care about it altogether. I was very tired, to tell the truth, and I was glad to have an excuse for resting, myself."

Mrs. Morris had already made another cautious attempt to get away, but had not yet done more than get up and sit down again. She was, however, biding her time. She knew that the other two would be sure to fall into an animated conversation by degrees, and then would come her opportunity. She encouraged them to do so by silence, judiciously managed, so as only gradually to become complete. Having at length retired from the conversation, she took courage to effect a retreat from the garden.

She chose the moment for doing so with

such skill, and carried out her manœuvre so dexterously, that she was close to the house before Miss Blessington had time to call out—

“Guinivere!”

But feeling instinctively that this was coming, she had hastened her at first cautious pace till it had almost broken into a slight run. And just as the word “Guinivere” was spoken, the last lines of the skirt of her dress disappeared round the doorway. Perhaps she did not hear her name called out. At any rate, she did not turn. And Miss Blessington and Percy were alone.

“Mrs. Morris did not hear you,” he said.

“I wonder what she has gone for. How troublesome she is!”

“Yet, how charming! She is one of the nicest women I ever knew.”

“Nice is no word for her, Mr. Carryngton. She is the dearest, best, truest little creature that ever lived. She will be back directly, I suppose. But do you really, seriously

believe what you were saying just now, that a clever capable man is justified in spending his life in doing nothing?"

"Doing nothing is a strong phrase. What *is* doing nothing? It is exceedingly difficult for any man—I am supposing that he is not actively doing harm—to do no good at all. I only meant to suggest that the amount of noise he makes is no criterion of the importance of his labours. Indeed, I fancy the best work is done silently."

"Not the most effective work, surely? And somebody must do the effective work. I cannot help it; all my sympathies go with the people who do the big things, the hard prominent fighting, who speak the grand speeches, and cover the large broad historical canvases. I have no natural sympathy with bees or beavers. I like huge human architecture; and of all efforts in that direction, I sympathize most with the men who tried to build the Tower of Babel."

Her eyes flashed with a grand light of

mingled purpose and defiance. It was not through want of reverence that she spoke thus. It was the volcanic energy within her, trying all the more to force itself out to the surface, for the superimposed dead weight of unavoidable female restraint. He had never before seen her look so handsome. But he answered very quietly—

“That is because you have a very vivid and generous imagination, and do not—and perhaps cannot—exercise it to the extent of its capacity. And therefore you want us men to do double work.”

“Perhaps I do. But you—most of you—seem to want to do only half work. You seem so awfully afraid of hurting something.”

“Or ourselves. Or both perhaps, more justly. This is not an age for immoderate efforts. We have become too critical for that.”

“It has become too critical to do anything but criticise; and criticism, as far as I can make out, never did anything in this

world, except gratify one man's conceit, or hurt another's."

"There is a good deal of truth in the remark, but I think you overstate it. Look at it in this light. A man can hope to do very little good by his ideas, unless he can get them listened to. Now enthusiasts in these times do not get listened to, except by inferior audiences, which renders them all the more suspected by the superior ones."

"But may not that be because they are too impatient to make converts? I cannot help thinking that, if a man is right, his enthusiasm will not, even in these calm, moderate, well-behaved days, prevent the fact of his being right being found out in the long run. Do you doubt it?"

"Not at all," he answered. "There I must agree with you."

"Well, then," she went on earnestly, "I do not see how it is to be found out that he is right, unless he is enthusiastic, unless, to use the phrase you began with, he makes a noise about it."

"It may not be found out in his lifetime, unless he does.

"Then it will be delayed," she objected.

"Yes; but then we admitted—did we not?—that it might be delayed by his excessive enthusiasm."

"Then it comes at most to the same thing, whether he is enthusiastic or not. It wholly depends upon his being right."

"Then why not prefer the calm, the well-behaved method, as you call it?" he asked, smiling.

"Because, I tell you, I prefer the ill-behaved, the noisy, the grand enthusiastic method. And I very much doubt if any man, who felt himself right, and sent to proclaim that right, could help being an enthusiast."

"Perhaps not. But what a life he must lead! In these days, at least. The stake is ready prepared for him. He must devote himself wholly to his work! he must give up everything for his end, without any certainty of reaching it. Do you remember

what I said in a joking manner in the Row, about a fortnight ago?"

"About a conscientious legislator? I remember perfectly well."

"I was quite in earnest when I said it, though my audience was too composite for me to say it in an earnest way. I *do* think that there is yet grand work, really grand work, for a man to do now-a-days. But then he must, in his own habits, break with the habits that surround him. A certain amount of monasticism, in the literal sense of the word, will be necessary for him. He must live abstemiously. I do not mean that he must not eat and drink enough, and clothe himself comfortably. But he must be abstemious from such luxury as he sees around him. And most of all, he must live alone."

"That seems to be a great point with you, Mr. Carryngton; a settled conviction of yours. But I cannot think it is a right one. You mean, of course, among other things, that such men—the best, the most

earnest men, mind you—must not marry. It follows, therefore, that women are to have for their husbands and their companions only the worst, the least earnest men. It is not a very flattering consideration for them. It supposes *them* also to be inferior. Neither is it encouraging. For if they, already inferior, are to associate only with the inferior, there is not much hope of their improving.”

“That is cleverly argued,” he said. “But does it prove more than that enthusiasm—since you insist upon its having full scope—must have female martyrs as well as male ones? Women have never been wanting,” he added, smiling, “at the stake.”

“Ah, but I believe there is a way out of the difficulty. Two negatives make an affirmative, do they not? And out of two martyrs let us see if we cannot get no martyr at all.”

“By the best men marrying as well as the worst, and always marrying the best women?”

"Precisely. Then you have a solution of the difficulty."

"But," he retorted, "you would then have two enthusiasms instead of one, which would make matters only worse."

"Oh, no, you would not," she answered, readily, and with an ardent look as if anticipating victory. "You have forgotten what you started with saying."

"What was that?" he asked.

"Why, that women by their position cannot exercise their imagination and enthusiasm to the full extent of its capacity, and therefore we want men to do double work. Did you not say so?"

"I did. Well?"

"But when they have got hold of men who would do double work, who, in fact, want to do all the work in the world, *then* these women will moderate, or, at least, direct their ardour, and do for them what they, perhaps, cannot perform themselves — namely, the office of criticism."

"Upon my word, you argue splendidly," he said, jumping up.

"Oh, no, I do not. Only I happen to be right."

"Perhaps you are. I will think about it. Good-bye."

They shook hands warmly, and he took his leave. She watched him as he strode across the grass plot until he reached the door. There he turned, raised his hat, and disappeared. Then she stamped her foot impatiently.

"Oh! how I wish he would do something! He has it in him; I know he has. If he had but a hundred a year, perhaps he would do it. But his connexion with Lord Rendover, and the certainty of being provided for, ruins him. If I were only a man!"

Carryngton meanwhile was slowly coasting along the shady sides of the squares which conducted to Piccadilly.

"Was there ever such a girl? Upon my word, she's wonderful. The way she carried her point in that argument. By

Jove! there's nobody like her. And how handsome she looked! And she's right, too, in what she says. Except, perhaps, about the marrying. I don't think a fellow who marries—for love, at least, and when he's young—ever does much. But she beat me in the argument. I verily believe she thinks I could do something if I tried. But monasticism and abstemiousness would never suit me, I fear. *She* would suit me a deal better.”

And having reached Piccadilly, he proceeded to offer a practical commentary on his opinions by turning into Grange's, and eating iced strawberries and cream.

He had not again asked for Mrs. Blessington before leaving her house, presuming that she was still engaged. He was right in the supposition, although Chichester Fleetwood had left her some ten minutes previously. For immediately after the departure of the latter, the squire had come downstairs and made his appearance. He was seeking his wife.

They were, and always had been, the happiest of married people. She was the most amiable of women, and had never made him, an unquestionably irritable man, lose his temper with her once in the long course of their conjugal life. Indeed, she knew him so well, and studied so fanatically to please him, that she habitually allowed herself to pass for a woman very inferior in intellect to what she really was, lest her superiority should annoy him.

He, for his part, was the kindest old fellow in the world, as long as he was not opposed. He was not a conceited man, and he was not by any means singularly selfish. But he had a high respect for authority in the abstract; and for that reason, and for no other, he was a mighty stickler for being obeyed in any matter where he considered his properly assigned authority was concerned. He was a staunch Protestant, and some people had accordingly ventured in his presence to abuse the Pope of Rome. But he had immediately rebuked them.

Romish doctrines, he allowed, were mischievous enough; but the Pope was the Pope, a visible person in power, and abuse of him was both dangerous and unbecoming.

As may be surmised, his intellect was not a very good, nor a particularly clear, one; neither did he ever suppose that it was. But he knew that parents were placed in authority over their children, and he held that husbands were placed in authority over their wives. No amount of argument, he considered, could shake that. It was a fundamental right, beyond the attack of logic on any minor points of difference. He was of course a deputy-lieutenant for his county, and his immediate superior, he considered, was the lieutenant thereof. Then, in the order of his life's eye, came bishops and the lord chancellor, and then the queen. He was the rankest of rank old Tories.

Mrs. Blessington secretly smiled at all this, but she loved him for it, obeyed him for it, and tried to act up to it herself. It

is not wonderful that they were very happy.

"I have just had Mr. Chichester Fleetwood here," she said, after their first salutations and first inquiries were over.

"Capital fellow, Fleetwood. How is he? Is he returned yet? I have seen no notice of the election. But I missed some of the papers down in the country. Did you not send them?"

"All of them, my dear, I assure you; all of them. I put them all up and directed them myself. I would not even let Gertrude do it."

"Very strange. I must complain to the postmaster down in the country. Remind me to do it—or will *you* write?"

"Certainly. It ought to be seen to at once. The postman gets fifteen shillings every Christmas, and it is shameful we should not be served properly."

"The fifteen shillings have got nothing to do with it, my dear. The work ought to be done properly in any case. Well, and

what had Fleetwood fresh? Nothing, I suppose, that one doesn't know."

"Well, yes, he had. I have had a most important conversation with him."

"With Chichester Fleetwood! What about, pray?"

"About Gertrude."

"About Gertrude! Why, what about her?" he asked, with evident astonishment.

"He wants your permission to propose to her."

"The devil he does! And what did you say to him?"

"That I could do nothing till I saw you," said Mrs. Blessington, a little alarmed at the manner of her husband, who did not seem quite so much gratified at the announcement as she expected him to be. "I said that I could have no objection——"

"You ought not to have said anything of the kind, Kate."

"Ought I not? I am so sorry if I ought not. But I really think I have done no

mischief. I said that everything depended on you."

"That was right enough. But it is a great pity that you should have seemed to give him any encouragement at all."

The most natural thing for Mrs. Blessington to have said next would have been, "Why?" But she was far too clever a woman and wife to do anything so awkward. "Why?" would have sounded not merely as an inquiry, but as an argument, as a possible setting-up of herself or of circumstances against his decision. She preferred to await in silence the voluntary communication of his reasons. These were very soon given.

"You have acted with far too much precipitation. You ought to have said nothing at all. Confound the fellow! No, I don't mean that. But the fact is, I have other views for Gertrude—views well-founded, which of course I should have communicated to you before had I not been away. I did not like to say any-

thing about it in a letter, for fear Gertrude might want to see it, or you might have incautiously told her to open the letter and read it before you had done so yourself."

"Is it anybody in our county? It isn't Frederick——"

"No, my dear. Don't be so impatient. It is Lord Rendover."

"Lord Rendover!" exclaimed Mrs. Blessington, rising from her chair.

"Yes, my dear, Lord Rendover. And why not? Is there any objection? Nothing against him, surely, is there?"

"Not a word, and no objection whatever. I was only surprised."

"And why are you surprised? Is he not good enough for her?"

"Oh, yes, quite good enough. I did not at all mean that he is not."

"And he is not too good, surely! I don't think there is a man in England or out of it too good for Gertrude."

"Neither do I, you may be quite sure."

It was only my surprise. I mean that I was not expecting it; that was all."

How cautious she had to be. Even her innocent expression of surprise had nearly been construed into rebellion and offence. But she had quite satisfied her lord, who continued—

"Let me see. What was I saying? Oh, that Rendover had himself spoken to me but only just the day before I left town, and that I had not liked to write to you on the subject. But now you know. Rendover wants to marry her, and I told him that I had not the slightest objection in the world, and that he might do his best to win her. I was quite right, wasn't I?"

This was a mere formal query on the part of the squire.

"Quite right," she answered. "I wish I had known before."

"Why? Because you would have been more cautious about what you said to Fleetwood? Oh, that's nothing. There must be an end to all that. I suppose he

will come and speak to me on the subject, and then I can give him to understand I do not approve of it."

"May I just offer a suggestion?" she asked.

"Certainly, my dear, any number."

"Of course you know best; and your wishes will always be my wishes. But, you know, young people now-a-days are not what young people used to be, and Gertrude has rather a high spirit."

"Oh, yes, she has; rather too high a spirit, I think."

"Will it not perhaps be better to manage rather than to provoke it? Mind, I am only counselling caution; not the giving up of your views, but the way of bringing them about. It is understood, I conclude, that we should both like to see Gertrude marry Lord Rendover."

"Yes, my dear, let that be thoroughly understood."

"Quite so. At present, however, I do not think that Gertrude cares for him in

the least. I speak of course only of my own observation."

"I daresay she does not as yet. But she does not know that he cares for her. Wait till she does. Indeed — by-the-by — he wished that nothing should be said to her about it, but that he should be left to do the thing for himself, and I told him I quite agreed with him. You need not trouble yourself. Rendover needs no assistance. He is one of the richest men in England, a most agreeable fellow, and all the women like him."

Simple Squire Blessington! There have been girls before to-day who have refused men "whom all the women liked." And do not be too sure that your daughter is not of that sort.

"Quite true, and there is very little doubt that your wishes and mine will be gratified. But whilst we give Lord Rendover every chance, and indeed every opportunity, don't you really think that it would be just as wise not to meet Mr. Fleetwood with an absolute refusal, but to be satisfied

with not giving him any encouragement? Gertrude might possibly—possibly, I say—refuse Lord Rendover, and then you know, Mr. Chichester Fleewood——”

She paused skilfully ; she wanted her husband to catch the drift of her argument without her stating it ; so that he might take it up and state it as his own. As such, it would be much more acceptable to him ; and as such, she would be able to use it to him ever after. She was not disappointed.

“Of course, of course ; I never meant that Fleetwood should be met with an absolute no. I know how to manage these things. But it is understood that Rendover is to have the preference, and you, my dear, will know how to act your part in a manner worthy of a mother’s grave responsibility.”

These last words were said with enormous pomp.

“And now, where is Gertrude? For I have not seen her yet.

As he spoke the door opened, and she entered.

CHAPTER VII.

OFFERS OF ADVANCEMENT.

PERCY CARRYNGTON had finished his strawberries some time since, but for all that did not leave Grange's. He evidently stayed there, however, not because he was lazy and did not care to move. He had looked at his watch impatiently three or four times and was now beginning to grow fidgety.

"Ah, here you are! You are late, old fellow! How are you?"

"I am very sorry, but I could not help it," answered Atwell Underhill—for it was he—"I had such work to get away at all."

"I daresay; but it's the only hour this business can be done. Come along. I wont ask you to have any strawberries, for

there isn't time, and that's all about it. We're late, as it is."

"Strawberries!" said Atwell, laughing, when they had got into the street; "I'm too full of this matter to think of anything of the kind. But how awfully good of you it is, old boy! You don't know how it will relieve my mind."

"Yes, I do; and that's precisely why we must have it done."

"You can't tell how bothered and miserable I have been about it."

"You look as if you had. But it's all in train now. I had a little difficulty about the other security; about getting them to lend the money without it. But it's all right."

"You mean you're the only security. I'm so glad; it saves one from anybody else knowing, and so from any danger of our people getting wind of it, which would be the very devil."

"But I have had to insure *my* life too for the amount. They seem to think me capital

security as long as I live, but of course they wont run the risk of my dying and leaving them in the lurch."

It will be remembered that the amount of Atwell's various liabilities was three thousand pounds odd; and that, following Carryngton's advice, he had transferred all these to one money-lender, who had paid them off, and now held Atwell as his debtor for the entire sum. He knew Atwell's position with Underhill, Morris, and Underhill, and he looked forward to years of usurious interest and fat profit out of his new victim.

Carryngton's plan for getting his friend out of this worthy's hand was simply this. A well-known life insurance company was to lend him three thousand five hundred pounds, with which the Jew money-lender would be paid off, both principal and interest. Atwell would have to insure his own life with the company for double the amount, and to pay back the sum borrowed within five years. In the ordinary course

of things, the company would have required two sureties for this sum being repaid in the time mentioned. But on Carryngton's representations, they had consented to be satisfied with having him alone as surety, provided that he would insure *his* life with them, to the amount of the sum advanced to Underhill.

Carryngton and Underhill had disappeared through brass-plated folding-doors, and were about a quarter of an hour before they again emerged into the street. When they did so, Atwell was looking more radiant than he had ever looked since his bad days began. He had got hold of Carryngton's hand, and was holding it fast.

"Upon my life, I don't know what to say. I feel so relieved, and so grateful, and so—— But what is a fellow to say?"

"Nothing. Only listen. Now, don't you go near that old Jew. I'll settle the thing with him. The money, you heard, will be ready next Friday, and I will make him take it at once."

"Wont the old scoundrel be mad? He thinks he has me to squeeze for many a good year. He'll only have made three hundred pounds by it, altogether."

"Plenty too in a couple of months—the ruffian! And you are perfectly free now, you are quite sure? You owe nobody anything?"

"Nobody. Nothing but, I daresay, a few house bills. Nothing that can be called debts. I must be hurrying off to the City, now."

"All right. But—you wont mind my saying it—economy is the thing now. Unless you get made partner in the meantime, you wont be able to pay these people off in five years, or anything like it. But you must do your best, by being careful; and stick to the firm. If all goes right, you're sure to have a share soon. How are you standing with them at present?"

"Much the same," Atwell answered, his face dropping a little.

"And the women? Is your wife getting

on better with them? Because that's all important, you may be quite sure."

Atwell's face had dropped still lower.

"Not a bit better," he answered. "Worse, I think, if anything. They behave shamefully to her. It's too bad: if you only knew. If I were only well on my legs, I'd cut them, all round."

"Don't do that, old boy. Keep in with them. That's my advice. Good-bye, then, and good luck to you!"

"Good-bye, and a thousand thanks. Hi! Hansom."

And Carryngton turned westward again, and alone. He looked at his watch—it was about half-past three. At four he intended to go to Park Lane to see his cousin, that being the best hour for finding him at home, and presuming that his cousin's desire to see him, not gratified yesterday, still continued. Perhaps Rendover had not returned. But if he had, his own house and four o'clock would be the best time and place to find him.

Lord Rendover had in reality returned, and had returned last night. He was gathering himself up now, in order to confront and overcome whatever obstacles might exist between him and the end which he had made up his mind to attain.

A very different man from Chichester Fleetwood, Lord Rendover troubled himself very little about the opinion of the world, save as it might aid or interfere with the gratification of his own personal desires. He regarded the world as he regarded Thornton, alias Abraham, in the light of a tool. Unlike his rival, he had not arrived at the conclusion that he wanted Miss Blessington, through and because of the previous idea that he ought to distinguish himself by marrying some girl of great beauty. He saw Miss Blessington, and he felt that she was intensely lovely, and accordingly he wanted her. Had she been not a Miss Blessington, but a girl far below him in station, he would have felt precisely the same, and we know how he would have

gone about gratifying his feelings. Being in his own rank of life, there was only one way of obtaining her, and accordingly he was going to take it. It would be difficult to say which of the two men was really less in love with her. Only he from the first had an intense passion for her, whereas Fleetwood had now acquired such a regard and liking as had grown up in his heart from his housing the idea that he should very much like to make her his wife.

Still Rendover was not the man to go straight to his end like a blind savage. He had untamed passions, but he had a most tamed and ruly intellect; and whilst he made it minister to the former, he made it master them at least so far as to guide them. In this instance, they both happened to work willingly in the same direction. If he ever was to marry—and he had no absolute objection to doing so—he could not do better than marry Squire Blessington's daughter. She was not of titled birth, but she was of most ancient lineage. And

whilst he would obtain this last for his descendants by a union with her, he could not be said to be showing himself thereby dissatisfied with his own too recent claims to the latter. It would be a peer marrying a commoner's child, an enormously wealthy owner of the soil taking to wife a girl with a slender fortune, if any at all. He would thus not only get what he wanted, but would stand better with the world for getting it, and therefore be in a stronger position for gratifying his next want, whatever it might happen to be, and whenever it might happen to arise.

He had quite satisfied himself that Chichester Fleetwood was on the same trail, and he smiled as he thought of it. He regarded Fleetwood as a poor, weak, vain creature, who was governed both in his choice of ends and of means by other people's opinions. Such a man would necessarily commit all the usual blunders, and not be in the least on the look-out for unusual antagonism. He was going to get

into Parliament, and to make his entrance there by the supposed secure means of a borough belonging to his own party. He was not dreaming of opposition. Therefore Rendover was determined he should meet with it.

But damaging a weak rival was not positively forwarding himself. To that too he would direct all his energies. At least there should be no danger behind him. He was resolved that the past should contribute nothing towards marring the present or the future.

For both reasons he wanted to see Percy. He had already sent a couple of notes to him by hand in the course of the morning. But the messengers had both returned with the answer that they could not find Mr. Carryngton. At four o'clock, however, Percy made his appearance.

"Have you changed your servant again? Has Thornton left you?" Carryngton asked, as he entered Rendover's study.

"No. Thornton has gone down into the

country for me. Should never think of changing him, willingly. He is an invaluable fellow. The man you saw is from the Manor, came up to town, upon my word I don't know what for. They seem to me to be always on the move. That's the plague of having such a lot of them. Lucky fellow you are, to have only bachelor's rooms. You did not get either of my notes, did you?"

"I got one yesterday, and went down into the country after you."

"But I meant this morning. I have been sending fellows to find you, but they said you were not in Jermyn Street."

"I have not been there since noon. But I made sure I should find you here now. How was it I missed you yesterday?"

"I was awfully sorry. I fear I made you run up and down a good deal. I fully intended to see you. But when I got to Bracknell, I found I could not return without neglecting an important matter I had gone over to settle, which I had fancied I

could settle in half-an-hour. I felt sure you would forgive me, and I should see you to-day. I left you in pleasant hands, I hope?" he added, smiling.

"Yes, pleasant enough. I had a very nice, cool, country two hours of it. I wanted my dinner, though. But I got something to eat."

"Oh, she saw to that for you, did she? That's all right. And what did you think of your companion?"

Percy shrugged his shoulders, a little surprised at the question.

"She was very kind and attentive, and that sort of thing."

"A pretty little cottage, isn't it? Didn't you think so?"

"To tell the truth, I did not go inside, except just into a room on the left as you enter, in order to write you a note. Did you get it?"

"No, I did not go back there, feeling sure that you would have left by the time I could have reached it. I came

straight back to town. But if you did not go inside, where did you get your dinner?"

"On the lawn. It was not dinner quite, but there was everything I wanted."

"On the lawn! How very picturesque, and romantic! Come, confess that you were very well treated, and that she was an agreeable hostess?"

"Very much so. But I should have been surprised, had it been otherwise. We all know your good taste."

Percy was trying to escape from a subject which he was astonished should be mooted at all. Accordingly he was not saying the most sensible or straightforward things in the world.

"Oh, those things are a mere matter of luck. She is exceedingly charming and pretty, and one cannot help having regrets at leaving such scenes behind. But, as I told you, I am thinking of getting married—this between ourselves—and when one marries, one must say good-bye to that sort of thing."

"I suppose so," said Percy, drily. He

felt that Rendover was not telling the whole truth, and yet he could not, if only for decency's sake, afford to be outspoken himself. He thought of the parting scene on the steps, but said nothing.

"But one ought not to be heartless or unkind in these matters," Rendover continued. "One likes to bring them to a close gently and without hurting anybody. I don't know your affairs, Percy; but I thought I might as well say that you may go to the cottage whenever you feel inclined. And if," he added, on the spur of the moment, seeing that Percy did not leap to the proffered bait as readily as he had half expected him to do—"if you think anything about it, you have only to tell me, and I'll make you a present of the cottage—twenty-one years' lease—and there'll always be five hundred a year settled on it to pay its expenses. I merely mentioned it, for her sake and yours. If it doesn't suit you, never mind. But if it does, you have only to tell me."

"All right," Carryngton answered, prudently, again recalling the scene on the steps, and remembering the offer that he had made to her of his services, and his promise that if ever he could be of use to her he would. "All right. I'll think of it."

—Lord Rendover had been a little discomposed—as far, indeed, as he ever could be—by the indifferent, if not half hostile way in which Percy had at first received his hint. He had no notion of the motive which had induced the young fellow to end by seeming to lend a more willing ear to it, and was almost inclined to think that the mention of the five hundred a year had wrought the magical effect. Yet he was a little surprised at its success ; for he had never remarked anything in his young cousin that smacked of mercenary feelings. He perceived, however, the sudden change of manner in the reception of his proposition ; and noting this, he was satisfied, and forthwith changed the subject.

"But let us talk about something else, Percy ; about the matter, in fact, on which I so much wanted to see you."

"Yes. I have been wondering what it was."

"About your going into the House, of course. You have done nothing as yet, yourself, have you?"

"Nothing. There has been nothing to be done."

"In the ordinary course of things there has not. But I have been thinking the matter over very seriously, and have been working for you quietly. There is a splendid opportunity for you now at once."

"Where? I have not even heard of a vacancy."

"At Leverstoke," answered Lord Rendover.

"At Leverstoke! But don't you know that Chichester Fleetwood is to sit for it, and that everything is settled?"

"I daresay Fleetwood has settled it all in his own mind, and perhaps his friends

down there have done the same. But we are going to unsettle all that for them, and give them a pretty surprise. At the present moment every vote in the House is of importance, and your vote arriving at this time would bring people's eyes upon you at once, and be to you an introduction such as few men can ever hope to get at starting."

"But," said Carryngton, "if I am rightly informed, it is one of the closest and safest Tory boroughs in the country, and there would not be the ghost of a chance for a man standing on Whig principles."

"Don't you be too sure of that. I tell you there would be a very good chance, a chance that I intend to make a certainty."

"But only by enormous bribery, surely?"

"Now, Percy, don't be foolish; really, I thought you had more judgment and knowledge of affairs than all that. You surely must be aware that the most distinguished men in the House of Commons have entered it by bribery. How can it be otherwise with so low a borough franchise?"

“Of course I know that; but you are talking of a place where—you see I have given myself the pains to know these things pretty accurately—where there has never been a contest before.”

“I know that too. All the more will the other side be taken by surprise. There is going to be a contest now, be quite sure of that; I have pledged myself to our leaders to do it, and I said that I intended to bring you forward. Never had a young fellow such a chance; the mere fact of your carrying the borough will lay the party under an obligation to you at once.”

“Yes, but I know the statistics of Lever-stoke perfectly well, and——”

“You can scarcely doubt that I know them also,” responded Lord Rendover.

“Then you must be aware that, even if by any possibility the place can be carried, it can be carried only by enormous bribery, bribery that will produce a scandal and an uproar.”

“Upon my word, Percy, you surprise me.

I want to keep you off this part of the subject, and you wont see that I do. What affair is it of yours? You are not going to bribe. You have not yet"—how skillfully the "yet" was inserted—"you have not yet got the means for enormous bribery, and all the world knows that you have not got it. All you have got to do, is to write a clever address, go down to Leverstoke, make yourself as agreeable as you so well know how to do, deliver some telling speeches, and you will see whether you are returned or not. Pray ask no more questions. I'll tell you that Thornton, about whom you were inquiring, is down at Leverstoke already, but that you had better not communicate with him in any way, even should you happen to recognise him; which you probably will not, as I don't suppose he's such a fool as to show himself in his own natural person. Now you know all that there is to know, and rather more than you ought to know. Is it settled?"

"But——" began Carryngton.

“You surely are not going to ask any more questions?”

“No. But does it not strike you, as rather a queer thing that, under the circumstances to which we have been alluding, I should suddenly go down and oppose Fleetwood, a friend of mine, at the very last moment, when he has made all his arrangements and everybody is taking it for granted that he will be returned unopposed?”

“No, not in the least. To begin with, I did not know that Fleetwood was a very intimate friend of yours.”

“Neither is he. But he is an intimate acquaintance of mine, and yours, too, is he not?—and I am on very good terms with him.”

“You need not consider me in the matter,” Rendover answered, indifferently. “Were I still more intimate with Fleetwood than I am, I should have no scruple in opposing his election at Leverstoke or elsewhere. Were I not debarred from doing so by my position, I should be only too

glad to have the opportunity of distinguishing myself, which I now offer to you instead. Private friendships have never been held in England to preclude men from public contests and rivalry."

"I know that. But this is an extreme case," urged Carryngton.

"How is it an extreme case? I don't see that it is."

"Why, in this way. Were Leverstoke an open borough, which had sometimes returned a Whig and sometimes a Tory, where nobody could say for certain which party was in the ascendant, and where, therefore, a contest was natural and expected, there might then be nothing objectionable in two friends struggling for political mastery. But for me to go down to Leverstoke and oppose Chichester Fleetwood—everybody would say that I had gone out of my way to oppose him, and oppose him where his success was certain, unless very scandalous and exceptional bribery were resorted to."

“Now you are returning to the old question, which really I imagined we had settled. As I told you before, the less you say about bribery to me or anybody the better. Can’t you see that?”

“But the matter,” replied Carrynton, doggedly, “cannot be considered properly without both questions being raised, and being raised, not separately, but together.”

“I think it would be much better, and much more sensible of you if you would raise neither. I have been planning the grandest opportunity for you in the world, and when I have made everything smooth for you, you raise these—these—fanciful obstacles.”

“Well, I may be wrong. I will think it all over. At any rate, I am sure I thank you very much for all the trouble you have taken, and are taking. But I trust you understand the nature of my objections. They are twofold, and so mixed up together that they cannot be separated. I shrink from entering Parliament—supposing that I succeeded——”

"Which you most certainly will," interrupted Rendover, "if you try."

"From entering it under auspices in which the whole world will say that I entered it by wantonly opposing a friend of my own—or an acquaintance, if you like—and at a place where I could not possibly have succeeded, except by most reckless and extravagant expenditure on somebody's part."

"Somebody will succeed there, be sure, for, as I told you, I have pledged myself to it. I hope it will be you, and I shall be very much disappointed if it should not be. Make up your mind as soon as you can."

"Yes, I will, and I will let you know immediately."

"Intractable fellow he is, Percy!" said Rendover to himself, as soon as ever Carryngton had left him. "Upon my word, I should not wonder if he ends by refusing to stand. And about the cottage and that girl, though he said very little, he was almost as stupid. In that, though,

I think he will be more likely to play my game for me. Luckily, however, in both matters, I have more than one string to my bow. And I must see to having them ready at once."

He rang, and ordered his brougham.

Mr. Richard Thornton, as his noble master had said, had already started again for Leverstoke, where he was charged with a most important and delicate mission, the whole nature of which we can easily guess, from having been present at the foregoing conversation.

But though Mr. Richard Thornton was thus bound for that excellent borough, he had some other little business to transact on the road; and when the train reached the Slough Station, he got out of the carriage, and chartered a vehicle for his own private use. Its destination was the little cottage between Bracknell and Windsor.

Though he had changed his occupation, and almost his skin, in accepting service under Lord Rendover, he had in no degree

changed his nature. He was still fundamentally Abraham, the billiard-marker, Abe, the weak tool of a couple of bold burglars, and then the weaker tool of a man who had him by the neck, and made him successively instrument in an abduction, traitor, informer, and finally valet. He was still the arrant coward, ready to crouch before the most terrible thing he saw. And there were still two very terrible things for him in the world; the felons whom he had convicted, and the master whom he served. The former were far-off. But for all that he dreaded them. The latter was always near, and therefore he dreaded him still more. All this last dread, however, had gone into the form of complete subserviency.

Habituated, however, and reconciled to this, Mr. Richard Thornton really lived a very comfortable, not to say luxurious life. He had very little to do that was arduous, and nothing that was disagreeable. His fondness for good living was largely grati-

fied. I almost think that, could he have been told that Bully Bill and Sam Slaughterous were dead and buried, he would have been a happy man. True, they had been sentenced to penal servitude for life. But men had returned before this from such an apparently final bourne, and Mr. Richard Thornton accordingly had now and then cold shudders and very queer dreams.

He was free from all such, however, to-day, as he was driven pleasantly along the road which we have had to traverse twice before. He had been raised to great trust by Lord Rendover. And although he never durst even think of himself for a moment as using that trust for his own advantage against Lord Rendover, he felt that the more useful he was made the larger would be his reward. Had he been a bold knave, it is not easy to see what he could have done against his master. Being a most cowardly one, he never dreamed even of trying.

He did not go round by the back way,

but approached the cottage just as we saw Carryngton approach it. When, however, he reached the front door, he paused. He evidently wished to be seen or heard approaching. Accordingly, he coughed rather loudly, and kicked his boots against the step, as though to knock the gravel off them. Immediately there was a face at the window of the room where Carryngton had written his note, and then Jessie came to the door.

"Oh, it is you, Thornton, is it?" she said.

"Yes, miss. I am going down into the West of England for his lordship, where I was only two days ago, and I thought I had better come and see you, miss, and tell you what I knew."

"Yes. Come in; quickly. In here, Thornton. Yes. Tell me. Any news?"

She looked anxious, excited, athirst for information.

"Nothing much, miss, I am sorry to say," he answered, as he followed her into

the room. Her poor pale face grew paler as he said this.

“But did you see them? either of them?” she asked eagerly.

“No, miss, I did not see them. I could not do that. And I did not understand, miss, that you wished me to do so.”

“No, and I did not. But what did you hear? And where did you hear it?”

“In the village, miss.”

“In Dipleyleydale or Dipleyleymouth?”

“In Dipleyleydale mostly, miss. I went to Britton’s—the library, you know, miss, of which you told me—and I got into conversation there with the man—I suppose it was Britton himself.”

“A little dark, middle-aged man, with spectacles?”

“Then it *was* Britton himself, no doubt,” Thornton answered, “that I saw. And then there was another person came in—a woman.”

“What was she like?”

He gave a rough description of her,

and Jessie tried to recall all the women she had known by name or sight at Dipleysdale and Dipleymouth, and at church at Uskmoor upon Sundays. She cross-questioned him, and put inquiry after inquiry, about hair, eyes, shawl, bonnet-strings, peculiarities of speech. But it all came to nothing. His description would have applied to several of the people whom she remembered, but attached to no one definitely and in particular. It would have been very wonderful if it had, and in such case would have been entirely the work of her own imagination. For Thornton had in reality never been at or near Dipleysdale since the night when Jessie had been carried off from the little bridge that spanned the Dipp.

“And what did you hear at Britton’s? Tell me all.”

“It’s not very good, miss, what I’ve got to tell you.”

“Let me hear it at any rate. Sit down and tell me.”

“Well, I began by asking Britton if any-

thing had been heard of you. I pretended not to remember your name, but spoke of you as the young person who had been missed last autumn."

"And what did he say?" she asked, so nervously anxious to hear this concocted conversation, that she had not the presence of mind to get at it all the more quickly, by saying nothing herself.

"He said, miss, that nothing had been heard, and that folks had long since given up expecting to hear anything. Indeed, he said they had given over talking about it; it was no use. And then the woman broke in, as he was getting me the papers that I pretended to want?"

"And what did *she* say? Did she know anything?"

"She seemed to know them; you know whom I mean, miss?"

"Yes," said Jessie, colouring. "And what did she say?"

"She said, miss—I fear it'll hurt you to hear, miss——"

"Never mind that, Thornton. Tell me what she said."

"That they didn't bother their heads about you any more, and that they were quite sure you were no good, and never had been."

Jessie sat pale and still as marble now; neither moving nor interrupting. Thornton went on—

"As for your having been drowned, as some people had suggested, they did not believe a word of it. You had stolen out of the house at night, and had gone away, and you might stay away. You had been seen in the woods, one evening before, with a fine fellow, no Dipleydale man, but a stranger, a gentleman, and you had gone off with him, and that was all about it. And then Britton said, 'Yes, that's about the truth, I suspect;' and then the woman went away; and I took the note paper, paid for it, and went away too. And that was all that happened."

"Thank you, Thornton," she said, without flinching.

“I wish it had been better, miss,” he said, “but I can only tell you what I heard. And if I can only be of any more service to you, miss, I am sure I shall only be too glad, if you’ll only command me. It would be the greatest pleasure in the world to me,” he added, rising and twirling his hat, “if I could be a comfort to you in any way. I should like to stay a little, miss, but I fear I must be going. Am I to go there again?”

“No, thank you. It would be no use; I am very much obliged to you for going as you have done. I am sure I feel very grateful to you, Thornton.”

“Not at all, miss. Anything in the world, to serve or please you.”

“Can you tell me,” she asked, “who Mr. Carryngton is?”

“Mr. Percy Carryngton?—he is my lord’s cousin. Do you know him, miss?”

“He came down here the day before yesterday. I had not seen him before.”

“He came down to see his lordship, I suppose?” Thornton remarked.

"Yes ; but Lord Rendover was not here, though Mr. Carryngton said he had come on purpose to see him, and that he had received a note from Lord Rendover in London begging him to come."

"Yes, I remember. I gave Mr. Carryngton the note in London."

"Then it was true? Lord Rendover had told him to come here. He did not see him, however, for Lord Rendover did not come. I only wanted to know who Mr. Carryngton was," she added, quickly, as though she had got to know all she wanted.

"Good day, miss. And if at any time—you understand."

"Thank you, yes; I will not forget. And thank you again for going to Dipleldale for me."

"Not at all, miss. Good day!" And Mr. Richard Thornton walked off to the vehicle which had brought him.

"That's funny," he said to himself, as he was driven away. "Why did he get Mr. Carryngton to come down here, and yet not

see him? He pretended to want to see him very much; and yet it's quite clear he did not want it so very pressingly, or he would have been here to receive him. I have it; he wanted Mr. Carryngton to see *her*, and *her* to see Mr. Carryngton. That's what he wanted; I see it all now. He wants to have her off his hands, I'm quite sure. I've thought that a long time, but I'm certain of it now. And he thinks Mr. Carryngton 'll take a fancy to her. And he probably will. Who wouldn't? She's an awfully nice sort."

Mr. Richard Thornton paused a little and reflected. Then he began to soliloquize again.

"Now, upon my word, that's hard. Just as I was beginning to think he'd let me take her, and that I should get her, myself! It would be a much more respectable thing too, and a—a sort of reparation to her, to marry her to me. I'd marry her to-morrow, if he'd only let me. Just fancy me married to her, and in one of those nice pretty

places just outside the park at Carryngton Manor! Wouldn't that be a life? A pleasant termination to all my bother, and a proper reward for all the risk I've run. And now just when I was beginning to think it likely, to find out that he merely wants to hand her over to Mr. Carryngton! But what a clever fellow he is! I wouldn't quarrel with *him*, for a good sum! But it's hard lines for a fellow that's been so useful. . . . She seemed rather cut up at what I told her. How she did swallow it all!" And Mr. Thornton grinned at the thought of how successful his lies had been. "But then—though I haven't been near Dipleydale, and have no intention of going—I'm quite sure that the people there do say exactly what I told her. How could they say anything else? And if they did say anything else, and she knew it, she might even now be tempted to go back and see for those old folks; for I don't think she's particularly jolly where she is, though it's a pretty place enough. Now, if he'd only put

me in it! No, I'd rather be at Carryngton Manor with her; he'll always want to keep me near him, and I'd rather be near him, too. He knows how to take care of himself; and as long as he's safe, I'm safe too."

And thus moralizing, the worthy Abraham continued his journey.

It had been no difficult matter, as may readily be supposed, for him to worm himself, with his master's connivance, into just so much of Jessie's confidence as led her to intrust him with the mission of discovering what was said at Dipleydale, of the girl who had left it last October. She had told him no more than was necessary to enable him to procure for her the information she wanted; believing, of course, that he knew nothing but what she told him. She had mentioned nothing about the violence offered to her; nothing in fact of the origin of her connexion with Lord Rendover. She had simply told him of Dipleydale, of Britton's, and of Mr. and Mrs. Barfoot's name. Knowing all the rest, as he did, of his own

knowledge, it was easy for him to concoct such a story as the above, wherewith to impose upon her credulity.

It produced all the effect which he had expected from it. She was already so strongly impressed with the impossibility of justifying herself; so convinced that what there was in truth to be said and what she would herself have to own, against her original conduct, was enough to raise the cruellest suspicion against the rest of it, and to rob it of all chance of having a favourable construction put upon it; so thoroughly convinced of all this, that she despaired of seeking refuge from her present woe in the arms of those whom she had never intended to leave. But she had not, even in her most despondent misery, pictured things to herself as being as terribly against her as she now heard from Thornton's lips that they were.

She had been seen, she was now told, with a gentleman in the woods; with a stranger, one far superior to herself in

station. And the whole of Dipleymouth, and Dibleydale, and Uskmoor knew this. The whole country side knew it. Probably it was known at Taunton also. Of course it was known there.

And Uncle Roger and Aunt Mary knew it. And what did they say? She knew now what they said, and she kept repeating it aloud to herself. She did not cry now, nor sob, nor sigh. She sat upon her chair, motionless, staring outwards, and saying over and over again the words that she had recently heard—

“They were quite sure I was no good, and never had been—never had been. I had stolen out of the house at night, and had gone away, and I might stay away. I was no good, and never had been. No good. No good. I might—I never—never had been. I might stay away. I might——”

And then her lips closed tightly, and she sat there, motionless.

CHAPTER VIII.

CARRYNGTON'S PERPLEXITY.

AT no period of his life had Percy Carryngton ever felt so much perplexed and annoyed as now. Even whilst still closeted with Lord Rendover, and on first hearing the proposition which had been made to him, he had instinctively and at once rebelled against it. He had, however, promised—and he did not regret the promise—that he would give it a day's calm consideration.

But the more he considered it, the more objectionable it seemed to him and the more surprising that it should ever have been made. On recalling all that he had said to his cousin, it appeared to him as if he had instantaneously comprehended the

nature of the offer, and had on the spur of the moment used precisely the arguments which he would have used had he cast about him for arguments for an entire year.

But though he had raised to Rendover all the objections which could orally be raised to him, other and more serious reflections forced themselves upon him, when he came to think the matter over alone, and with that complete frankness in which we rarely ever indulge except when we are face to face with ourselves.

It was not only that Rendover had asked him to do a thing which, as far as his own judgment went, he ought not to do, but that the suggestion had arisen out of his own peculiar connexion with Rendover, and therefore called that connexion in question.

He was alone, as I say, and therefore he could afford to be perfectly frank. What then did he see in it all? He saw very much, for his eyes were completely open.

He could not believe that Rendover wished him to contest Leverstoke, either because of a desire to serve the party to which they both belonged, or because of a desire to give him a fine start in Parliament, or because of both.

He could not accept the first supposition, inasmuch as Lord Rendover was not ambitious in the ordinary sense of the word; neither had he ever shown himself, like his father, a violent party man. The carpet manufacturer had everything to gain by doing so, and had been politically serviceable in consequence. The rich luxurious peer, on the other hand, had got all he wanted. Besides, Carryington was quite sure that no party would ever ask from a man so outrageous and Quixotic a service as that of contesting an out-an-out close borough like Leverstoke.

Nor was it any the more possible that the second supposition should be true. If Rendover wanted to put him in Parliament, there would very soon be scores of other

opportunities of doing so, and opportunities far more desirable and entirely without reproach. Was it not incredible that Carryngton would be advanced in people's eyes by entering Parliament over the humiliation of his friend, and at a cost which all the world would know to have been unprecedentedly enormous?

What then could be Rendover's motive, he asked himself? One motive, and one only. And thence sprung another question, quite as perplexing as the first, and far more ugly.

Percy was now again thoroughly convinced that Lord Rendover wanted to marry Miss Blessington. His first conjecture on that head, made nearly three months ago, was the right one. Any doubts on the subject, which he had since harboured, were mistaken.

But Chichester Fleetwood also wanted to marry Miss Blessington. The whole world knew that, or at least was saying so. The whole world—generally correct in such

matters—was also saying that he was going to become a member of the House of Commons, in order to further his chance of getting her. Therefore——

What necessarily followed the “therefore?” Why, that Rendover was going out of his way to oppose Fleetwood’s success in that direction, and was going to spring a surprise upon him, in order to injure his chance, and thereby serve his own.

And to aid him in this purpose he turned to Carryngton. Why? Again Percy asked himself, why? Simply because Percy was his dependent and regularly accepted money from him.

Here perhaps Carryngton should have brought his reasoning to a close, had he been perfectly calm and sensible. But by this time, as may be imagined, he was not very calm. He was in a frame of mind that advances rather than halts; that pushes on and seeks to get at the very root and end of matters. Accordingly he dragged

into consideration a question that might justly have been excluded.

He asked himself why Rendover had made him that other offer, about which less had been said, but to which it was evident a favourable reply was very much desired. Why had he been dragged down to the cottage? Why had Rendover not been there to meet him? It was clear enough now. Rendover wanted to get rid of the girl because—or partly because, no doubt—he wanted to marry. There was but one step more required—and Carryngton in his ardent mood rapidly took it. Rendover wanted to hand her over to him, and was willing to put him into Parliament, because he intended him *not* to marry. He was bribing him first, and saddling him with an obstacle afterwards!

Reading French novels on the shores of the Mediterranean, sipping coffee, smoking cigarettes, pedestrianizing in the Engadine, living on anything or nothing, and anywhere or nowhere, were surely better than

this! And this is where he had got to, after six or seven years of fashionable life in London, and being the cousin of his cousin!

He had to go out to dinner that evening, and he went. It was remarked that he was neither so bright nor so amusing as he had the reputation of usually being. He had, however, done his very best to conceal the inward annoyance by which he was being plagued, and did not attempt to quit the society in which he found himself, a moment sooner than other guests. Then, however, he went straight home to Jermyn Street.

He went on foot, however, for it was a lovely summer night, and took for his route the quiet side of Piccadilly, where only a railing skirts the pavement. It was a walk sadly troubled with misgivings. Had his life so far been a mistake? Had the road which he had been taking for the last seven years been a wrong road, or no road at all—a blind alley? And had he got to the end of it, and must he turn back, and get

into the high road again, and be just as if he never traversed this by-one at all? Had he lived all his life, since he came of age, for nothing, for worse than nothing?

It looked very like it. He could scarcely suppose that Lord Rendover would regard him and treat him, after the rejection of his wishes, just as he had regarded and treated him before. And how he really regarded him, was only too evident by the very fact of the offer having been made. He threw the end of his cigar away, plunged his hands into the pockets of his light overcoat, and so walked on till he reached his lodgings.

He went to bed, slept badly, and woke early. This, however, made him get up all the later. The whole time of dressing, he thought of nothing else but this same plaguey question. He was much calmer than he had been overnight. Starlight and sunlight affect our way of looking at things, and modify them very differently. The safest moment for taking a decision is before

breakfast. It is the moment when we are perhaps the least brave, and certainly the least rash.

Was he going to act rashly and intemperately, Carryngton asked himself. Was he too much or at all influenced by personal considerations of dignity? Was he made over touchy by the very fact that he was under considerable obligation to his cousin? Was he influenced by the suspicions raised in connexion with his visit to the cottage? And would his intended refusal—for he had so far made up his mind to refuse—to oppose Fleetwood at Leverstoke be an ill-judged refusal, needlessly compromising to his whole career?

It would be quite sure to compromise it. Indeed he felt sure that he was now deciding a much larger question than that of Leverstoke. He was probably deciding whether he would continue to accept Lord Rendover as the director, friend, and abettor of his career, or would carve it out for himself, without Rendover's countenance at all.

He had nearly finished dressing. He was taking up his watch from the toilet-table. He held it a moment in his hand, and thought.

Yes. Why not? Where could be the harm? She was very sensible, and she had besides such a keen sense of honour. He wanted the advice of somebody who united both those qualifications. They were exceedingly good friends. Why not? He would consult Miss Blessington, and hear her opinion.

He should not be obliged to tell her everything. He would tell her just so much as was necessary to enable her to form an opinion whether he could properly contest Leverstoke or not. There was no reason why he should not let her know the relations between him and his cousin. All the world knew them more or less; she probably among the rest.

He felt quite certain of two things. The one was that she had so fine a sense of right that she would never, when appealed

to for counsel, advise him to do anything dishonourable. The other was, that she took so kindly an interest in him that she would never advise him to do anything wantonly injurious to his prospects. Evidently she was the very person for the office of counsellor.

He would seek her this very morning. He felt a great deal more happy in his mind, finished dressing, and went and ate an exceedingly good breakfast.

CHAPTER IX.

TWO HEADS BETTER THAN ONE.

IT was fortunate that his visit to Mr. Blessington's, two days ago, had turned out to be such an informal affair. On that occasion he had seen but the young lady of the house. It was therefore easier for him to call again to-day. He must take his chance whether he found her at home at all, and whether, supposing that he did so, he would have the good luck to have such a *tête-à-tête* apart as would enable him to state his case and get from her a full opinion upon it. If he failed, he must trust to seeing her in the Park or somewhere or other in the evening.

He was so anxious to do what was right,

and so impressed with the feeling that whatever he did would be fraught with exceedingly grave consequences, that he had already made himself very nervous as to the question whether he should find her at home or not. A funny consequence of this was that when he got there he unintentionally asked, not for Mrs., but for Miss, Blessington.

"*Miss* Blessington is away from home," answered the servant, laying a stress upon the "*Miss*," evidently a little surprised at the inquiry.

"Mrs. Blessington, I mean," said Carryngton. "Is *she* not at home?"

"Yes, sir, but she is not very well to-day."

"I am sorry to hear that." And he took out his card. "Did you say that Miss Blessington was out of town?"

"No, sir, but she is spending a few days in Palace Gardens with Mrs. Grantley Morris."

Carryngton's blunder had been a very

fortunate one. But for having made it, he would not have known where Miss Blessington was. Now he not only knew where she was, but he could very easily find her. He hailed a cab, and told the driver to go as fast as ever he could to Palace Gardens. His hopes had sunk within him when he had received the servant's reply to his first unpremeditated question; for it had seemed to destroy all chance of his seeing her during the brief time that yet remained to him for forming and announcing his resolution.

"What a lucky piece of stupidity!" he said to himself, as the Hansom whirled along outside the Park. "But how funny it was! Now I shall be able to have a really good talk with her."

Mrs. Morris was at home. She had just finished luncheon, the servant said, and would be glad if he would go down to the dining-room.

He descended and found both her and Miss Blessington.

"I thought you would have some lunch

That was why I asked you in here. We have only just finished."

"Indeed, *I* have not finished, Gertrude. She drags me about all the morning, Mr. Carryngton, and then she expects me to have no appetite."

"I am so glad to hear you have not finished; for in that case I can begin more comfortably. Thanks. Allow me, Mrs. Morris."

He said nothing about his having called at Mrs. Blessington's, but permitted the hostess to think that the visit was made entirely on her account. Who is not guilty sometimes of such silent hypocrisies? He might have told the truth, however, without doing any harm. Guinivere had not long been married. She had but lately passed through a stage of which makes the kindly-hearted very tolerant ever afterwards of "young people." And as such she was good enough to regard her two present companions, one of whom was as old as herself, and the other considerably older.

Marriage, however, as we know, confers enormous dignity.

"I am staying here, you must know," said Miss Blessington. "This is where I come when every other place grows too dull to be endured."

"She means, her home of refuge from the worship of the world, when the flowers and the incense become overpowering."

"A sort of sacristy, I suppose," said Carrynton, "where she is carried and kept between feast-day and feast-day, when there is nothing going on in the shrine of fashion."

"That is precisely it," said Mrs. Morris. "She would like to make you believe that it is gayer here than where she comes from."

"And so it is. It is never free from visitors and bustle from morning to night. And then she pretends that *I* have brought them. I declare that I left special word that nobody should know of my whereabouts."

Carryngton thought how very faithfully her injunctions had been obeyed.

"But," she continued, "I am resolved to change my retreat. Can you tell me where to go to, Mr. Carryngton?"

"I cannot encourage you in any such conspiracy against the human race," he answered. "Indeed, if I could bring myself to believe that you were really meditating it, I should take upon myself to denounce you to the community, and put them on their guard against your intended escape. But I confess I cannot regard your coming to spend three or four days with Mrs. Morris as any proof of such evil designs. Quite the contrary."

"And you approve of her being kept here, then?"

"Most strongly. She is better here even than at home, I am sure."

He certainly felt what he said. Was it wonderful?

"I am delighted to have your encouragement. Gertrude was talking of going away

the day after to-morrow. Now I shall keep her till the end of the week, at the very least."

"Ah, I see I am surrounded by enemies. I suppose I must submit," said Miss Blessington, laughing. "The weakest always goes to the wall."

They all three went up to the drawing-room; but, as soon as ever the door was shut, Carryngton perceived that he was alone with Miss Blessington. He thought he had better begin at once.

"I wanted to see you so much," he said, "and I have been singularly fortunate in finding you. I went to your house first."

"But how did you find out that I was here? Oh, I suppose mamma told you."

"No, she did not. I did not see Mrs. Blessington."

And he proceeded to tell her of his blunder.

"I want to ask your advice about a matter of great importance."

"My advice! I cannot think it will be of any use to you."

"Will you wait till you hear what it is I have got to ask you?" he said.

"Certainly. I am sure I should like to be of use to you if I could, and should be immensely proud of being so."

"Thank you, so much. What I am going to say is said in confidence."

"Of course. You may be quite sure of my silence, though I do not think I can promise you anything more."

"Well, listen. You know, do you not, that Mr. Chichester Fleetwood is going to stand for Leverstoke very soon?"

"Yes," she said, laughing. "He seems full of it." At the same time she blushed just a little. "What he wants to go into Parliament for, I can't conceive. He will be no use there. He is very nice and a thorough gentleman, but not the most brilliant person in the world."

"Quite true. However, he wants to get in, and he has as perfect a right to do so,

and will be, I should think, as useful, as every two out of three people who do the same."

"And he is perfectly sure to succeed. There is to be no contest. That is a sort of thing I should scarcely think he would relish."

"That is the precise point. There *is* going to be a contest, and it is suggested to me that I should have the honour of opposing him."

"But are you thinking of doing so?" she asked.

"I want your opinion. I will give you the facts, and then you will be able to judge whether I ought to do so. In the ordinary course of things, he ought not to be opposed at all. The place has never been contested. Do you understand anything about these electoral questions?"

"Very little. But I know that there are certain places for which none but Whigs can hope to be returned, and others for which none but Tories can; others again for which they have to scramble."

"Precisely. Then you know quite enough. Leverstoke is a place completely in the hands of the party to which Mr. Fleetwood belongs. He ought therefore to have what is called a walk over. And nobody of the other side would have the slightest chance of beating him except by enormous bribery."

"And you are to go and do that? And you, a friend of his?"

"Precisely. Ought I to consent to do it or not?"

"What do you think yourself?" she asked, with a strange look.

"I have the strongest objections to doing so."

"I should think you had. You cannot do it. Who wants you?"

"Lord Rendover," he answered at once. "But remember! this is strictly between ourselves. He proposes it. He has lately expressed a wish that I should go into the House."

"Yes, you told me so, some little time

ago. Now, do you really want my opinion fully, frankly, and without reserve?"

"Of course I do, or I should not have consulted you."

"Then it is this. Firstly, that the proposal made to you is too monstrous to be talked of any further. And secondly, that I wish, for your own sake, that your connexion with Lord Rendover was a little less close."

"He is my cousin."

"I know that."

"He has been immensely kind to me. He found me—I am going to be very honest with you—with a hundred a year. He has been allowing me eight times that sum. So far I owe him everything."

"Pardon me, Mr. Carryngton. You owe him your dependent—some people, perhaps, would call it your independent—position, and now this most dishonouring proposal."

"Do not suppose, Miss Blessington, I beg of you, that I did not feel how dis-

honouring it was. I fully intended to reject it, if I had not succeeded in finding you. I only thought that I might be allowing myself to be governed by self-love, and that somebody else's opinion would decide that doubt for me."

"I am sure of it, Mr. Carryngton. I cannot suppose for a moment that your soul did not rise in arms against such a scheme. But let us dismiss that. It seems to me too plain to be discussed. I want you to permit me to say what I think, upon a much larger, and to you more important point. May I?"

"Say whatever you like. If I did not value your judgment most highly, it is clear that I should not have asked it."

"Then I think Lord Rendover has been of anything but service to you. He has kept you in elegant idleness for—for how long?"

"It is about seven years since I came to England."

"For seven years then. He has posi-

tively taken those seven years from you, and at the end of them, you see what he wants to do with you. Do you not think you could have done something better with yourself?"

"I wanted to get something to do in the Foreign Office, or in the diplomatic service," said Carryngton, apologetically; "and asked him at the very first to second my wishes. But he threw cold water on the scheme, and said I had better wait."

"Yes, and dawdle about and do nothing, like the rest of his—of our—world, until such time as you could do something that is called *distinguished*, or be useful to him or to a party, and obnoxious to an opponent, or anything of that kind. It is the old story. Esau was not the last young man that sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. I see it happen every day."

"And I have done so, I suppose?" he asked, plaintively.

"Yes, Mr. Carryngton, you have. I flatter nobody, and I think you will do me

the justice to see that I do not want to flatter you, at any rate. But—I would not tell you these things if there was anybody else to do it, but it seems as if there were not—you have a great deal in you. You are better, cleverer, abler, than most of the people one meets, and you are doing just as little as the most useless of them. It was your birthright to do something, and you have sold that birthright to Lord Rendover for—eight hundred a year!”

He could not say a word in reply to the severe accusation. He felt that it was all true, and could only bend before it.

“Am I to give it him back—surrender it—refuse to take it?”

“Unless you feel virtuous enough to be able to do something with it,” she replied. “Given two men of equal energy and determination, the one with eight hundred a year and the other with nothing, the one with the eight hundred a year is in a better position for doing something with his energy and determination than the other. But such a

case very rarely happens, and it certainly has not happened to you, if you will forgive my saying so, Mr. Carryngton."

"Upon my word, I often feel very much ashamed of myself. I assure you I have over and over again resolved to do something, but ——"

"But you have been waiting for your patron to suggest it. He has suggested something for you to do at last, and you see what it is."

"And I certainly shall not do it," he replied.

"But what *will* you do? Do you think men commonly assist younger men—unless perhaps they are their sons, and even that is a rare case—without having something to say as to how the assistance shall be turned to account? You will correct me if I am wrong. It was either in the *Spectator*, or some translation, that I read the other day a saying of Socrates, that the person who accepts money from another buys himself a master."

"By Jove! it's wonderfully true," said

Carryngton, impressed with the justness of the observation all the more forcibly from its being so applicable to his own present circumstances.

“That it is. No doubt I share many of the prejudices of our class, Mr. Carryngton, besides having, I dare say, some very bad ones of my own. But there is one prejudice that I have always rebelled against ; and that is the prejudice in favour of miscalled independence as against the being obliged to work. What a man earns is his own ; and that is independence. What he receives from other people is still theirs and not his at all. I would rather be a stout shoemaker than the typical younger son, nephew, or cousin, of the fashionable world.”

“I don’t think I could make shoes,” he said, with a smile, but a little sadly. “But I am willing to do something or other. And, upon my word, Miss Blessington, I think so much of you, I honour your sense of right so intensely, that I am

quite ready to lay down my eight hundred a year to-morrow if you think I ought." He came closer to her. "I swear to you, I will do it."

"Do not be rash," she said. "I am a very severe counsellor. But do you declare seriously"—she went on slowly—"that you will give up every farthing of it, if I tell you that I think you ought?"

"I do. Because I should feel that if you said I ought, I ought."

"And are you ready to promise to be bound by my decision?" she asked, looking at him intently. "Think what you would be sacrificing."

"I should be sacrificing more, or the entire chance of more," he said, correcting himself, "than *you* have any idea of."

"You would immediately become a person of no consequence. Do you know that?" she asked.

"Yes, I know that perfectly. Of course, I should be nobody."

"In all probability you would not be able to marry for years."

"Probably never," he said. "I know that too. Indeed—never, Miss Blessington. My time for such would have slipped away."

"You would have to give up your club, or clubs. You would have to change your rooms. You would have to change your tailor. We both laugh at this. But soberly, all this would be very terrible, more terrible than you can imagine. Terrible, day after day."

He looked at her steadily, but said nothing. She continued—

"Do you realize all this? And am I to decide for you now?"

"Yes, now," he answered; "the sooner the better."

He did not say it rashly or from bravado. He knew that it would be, as she had said, a terrible change for him. He had known already what it was to be poor, when he was little more than a boy, and it was not pleasant even then. Now that he was a man,

and had grown habituated, by seven years of easy experience, to the enjoyment of almost every luxury, it would be hard work, sorely hard work, going back to the old state of things. In a word, it would be the entire undoing of himself and beginning now what ought to have been begun then. But he did not shrink.

“And you will be absolutely bound by my decision?”

“I will,” he said.

She drew a long breath, as if of relief.

“Then you must not give it up, at once. I do not see sufficient reason for your doing so. You will, of course, refuse to be any party to the scheme proposed, but refuse quietly and courteously. Your very refusal, however, will probably be an offence. You will also, if you follow my advice, be on your guard against any other proposals for your advancement, that do not come from yourself. And, in honour’s name, begin to do something, success in which does not depend upon so insecure a foundation

as another man's favour. Further than that, I should not presume to advise you. I feel highly flattered by your having asked my advice, and I have given it honestly and to the best of my ability."

"And I thank you immensely," he said. "Henceforward I trust I may consider that we are very fast friends."

"I trust so," she replied, "but more through your generosity in asking for my opinion, than through my giving it."

"And must I change my tailor?" he asked, smiling. "And to how many clubs may I belong? Or must I give them all up?"

"I am sure you are quite capable of managing your own affairs with skill, when once a rude shake like this one has awakened you to a sense of the general spirit in which they should be conducted, and of the peril of conducting them in any other."

As she said this, Mrs. Morris re-entered. She could not have joined them at a better moment. Quite enough had been said; and

it put an easy and natural end to a peculiar and difficult conversation, which immediately broke off into more ordinary channels.

"The more I see of him, the more I like him," said Mrs. Morris, as soon as he had left them, and the two female friends were alone.

"One would scarcely think so," said Gertrude, putting her arm round Guinivere's waist, "considering that you nearly always leave the room in which you happen to be with him."

"Do I?" she asked, innocently. "Really did it seem rude?"

"No, you dear, foolish, frightened thing. As if you could be rude!"

"I had to see to my household affairs. Oh, yes! wait till you're married, and you will know what it is to have the care of a house."

"And a husband, and—yes, we know all that. We poor spinsters are at least saved all those oppressive cares. But I think you

should not leave me to entertain your guests, however much you may leave me alone with the same people in my own garden. It is too bad of you."

"I see you do not mean it, Gertrude. I can tell it by the roguish twinkle in your eyes. You did very well without me."

"Well, perhaps I did. But that was because I exerted myself."

And still these bosom friends continued to exercise the reticence that we have remarked before, when Percy Carryngton rather might have been than was the subject of their conversation.

"I trust I have done no mischief," Gertrude Blessington thought to herself when she was alone. "I told him what I thought and what I have been thinking for a long time. And what he told me to-day, convinces me more than ever that I was right."

Some people have what is called a twist or turn for music, others for caricature, others for intrigue, others for conversation.

Gertrude Blessington had always manifested a turn for nobleness. Nobody could say when it had begun in her; though it had grown with her, it had always seemed to be there. From earliest childhood she had always been noted for taking the heroic side, the lofty view, of things. Some said it was the blood in her. But her mother was a shrewd worldly woman enough, and the squire had certain prejudices which it would be a strained application of the term to call peculiarly noble. But as we are not called upon to account for the colour of Miss Blessington's hair, so perhaps we shall be similarly excused if we state this "nobleness" in her character and tone of mind, without further attempting to fathom it.

As long as Carryngton had been with her, he had been sufficiently influenced by her loftiness to be ready to face much more serious contingencies than any which as yet presented themselves. But when he left her and was alone with himself and the plain realities of his position, he felt not

only perplexed but downcast. His had not been an actively unworthy life, but it had been indolent and luxurious, and hence he was ill prepared to face the possibility of a future in which luxury might have to be entirely abandoned, and indolence exchanged for activity in some form. For the present, however, he must content himself with a literal compliance with his fair counsellor's advice, and leave the rest to later consideration.

When he arrived at his club, he sat down at once, and wrote the following note to Lord Rendover:—

“DEAR RENDOVER—

“ After mature consideration, I am unable to arrive at any other conclusion than the one towards which you must have perceived that I leaned, during our last interview. I so fully expressed myself upon the subject on that occasion, that I need not repeat the reasons which compel me to decline to contest Leverstoke. Re-

greeting that there should be this difference of views between us,

“I am yours very sincerely,

“PERCY CARRYNGTON.”

He felt a little relieved when this note had been sent. But he could not be blind to the probability that henceforth his relations with Rendover would be very different from what they had hitherto been. Convenience and love of ease were pulling him in one direction. Manliness, the suggestions of conscience, and Gertrude Blessington, were pulling him in another. But whichever voice he followed, one thing was clear. All chance of marrying Gertrude was gone for ever. He had never sanguinely harboured the idea of making her his wife, but now he must abandon it altogether. If he pursued the line of conduct which she was bent upon counselling, he would soon probably not be in a position to marry her or anybody. If he acted counter to her advice, it was perfectly certain that he would lose all her

esteem, and that any chance of winning her would be wholly gone. Either way, she never could be his. And now, for the first time, he confessed to himself—he was forced to confess to himself—that he loved her.

CHAPTER X.

PLAYING HIGH.

THE whole town was talking of it. Never had there been such an extraordinary surprise and such unblushing bribery. Of course there would be a searching inquiry; but people were saying that what had occurred had been done so cleverly and mysteriously that nothing would be established by an inquiry but what all the world already knew, that Leverstoke had been the scene of corruption unprecedented in electoral annals.

Chichester Fleetwood had not been returned. His opponent, a barrister of indifferent repute, had headed the poll by a majority of three. But where could the

money have come from? The party in office were publicly accused of having won the seat by an expenditure of twenty thousand pounds. But they not only denied it, they laughed at the ridiculous supposition. And the sum expended was so immense, that nobody versed in political matters had any difficulty in believing them.

As for Fleetwood himself, he had completely lost his head. Confident of victory till within two days of the election, he met the discovery that his victory was imperilled with a resolution that he would win at all cost. He forthwith imitated the tactics of his adversary; and he had now the annoyance and misery of knowing that he had spent fully as much as the other side, had spent it much more openly, and had thereby precluded himself from getting the seat on petition, as he would assuredly have got it had he himself abstained altogether from the illegitimate means by which he had been defeated. He was resolved to petition, nevertheless; for, as we have said, he had

completely lost his head. He had spent twenty thousand pounds fruitlessly, and he was now going to spend perhaps half as much more, only in order to prove that he had done so.

Although public divination was completely at a loss, he felt perfectly certain that the ugly trick played him had been directed by Lord Rendover. This, and the consciousness that he was unable to prove it, aggravated the rage and mortification of defeat. His vanity was grievously touched, and his schemes had been materially damaged. At least, he thought so. He had necessarily been away a considerable time from London, and he had been hoping that the honours which he should bring back with him on his return, would far more than compensate for his absence. He returned without the anticipated honours and aids to social victory, to find that his absence had been turned to good account by the man whom it would be idle to call by any other name than that of rival.

He heard everybody saying that Lord Rendover would be accepted by Miss Blessington before the end of the season, and some people saying that they were quite sure she was engaged to him already. He was always with her; in the Park, at the Opera, at flower shows, at every ball that was given. He was always organizing dinners, dinners at Richmond, dinners at Greenwich, dinners at Windsor, at all of which Squire Blessington, his wife, and their daughter were the principal and most courted guests. As a bachelor, Rendover did not entertain in London; but he more than made up for his disadvantage in this respect by these [constant parties up the river, or wherever excuse could be found for agreeable gatherings.

To Chichester Fleetwood the news was more than exasperating. It set him beside himself. And he very soon found, by the evidence of his own experience, that the news was strictly true. He had been unfortunate in his attempts to see the Bles-

singtons ; and when he did at last meet them, there was nothing to encourage and much to alarm him. Miss Blessington certainly treated him as she had invariably done, with exceeding friendliness ; but her mother was scarcely cordial and manifestly cautious, and the squire's behaviour was cold and indifferent, so as almost to amount to rudeness. The occasion was a horticultural fête at Chiswick, and Fleetwood had lost no time in accosting Mrs. Blessington, whom he met some twenty minutes after his arrival.

“ You have heard of my defeat ? ” he said to her.

“ Of course we have, and we are very sorry for you ; very sorry, indeed. ”

“ Nothing but the foulest possible play could have prevented my being returned, ” he said. He could not speak of the event with common moderation, though he had yet enough good sense left to abstain from communicating to everybody his suspicions as to the author of his defeat. “ It is the

most disgraceful business that ever occurred. But they have not heard the last of it, I can assure them."

"Never mind, Mr. Fleetwood," said the lady, provokingly. "I have always understood—though, of course, I know nothing about these things—that bribery was exceedingly common."

"Yes, but done in such a manner, and——"

"Well, let us not talk of it. I am sure I wish you better luck next time. We all do. Very few men, I am told, get in the first time. You will be returned for some other place."

Mrs. Blessington was about to leave him in order to talk with somebody else close by. But Fleetwood was far too much excited to allow the opportunity to pass by without saying something concerning the other matter which was still more largely absorbing his mind.

"One moment, Mrs. Blessington, I beg of you. You remember the conversation which you were good enough to allow me

to hold with you, three weeks ago, concerning your daughter and myself?"

"I do," she answered, "and I got myself rather into trouble by acting without that authority which, I will confess, I ought first to have consulted."

"You do not mean Miss Blessington?" he asked, with alarm.

"No, I mean my husband, Mr. Fleetwood," she answered, with a distant dignity, which she had never before employed in her intercourse with him. "I must ask you to lay no stress upon anything which then passed between us, save so far as I conveyed to you the assurance that, personally, I should have no objection to you becoming the husband of my daughter."

"Am I to understand from that," he said, "that Mr. Blessington would object?"

"I should not like to answer the question positively. Indeed, I have no right to do so. Mr. Blessington alone can decide."

"Then you would advise me to address

myself directly to him. Is that what I am to understand?"

"Far from it, Mr. Fleetwood. I should advise you to do nothing of the kind. If you really wish for my advice——"

"Which I do, my dear Mrs. Blessington, I assure you."

"Then you will be satisfied with knowing what my views are, and doing what lies in your power to further your own, without being rash or precipitate."

Even a man so excited as Chichester Fleetwood could not fail to catch the real meaning, and fathom the real motives of Mrs. Blessington. She did not want to throw away, as no doubt her bolder husband would have thrown away, all possibility of having him for a son-in-law. But if such was her inmost thought, had he not got the secret of the situation?

It seemed quite clear to him that Mr. Blessington wished, and was determined, that his daughter should marry Lord Rendover, and was therefore anxious that

all other competitors should be beaten off. Mrs. Blessington, on the other hand, whilst having precisely the same wishes as her husband, felt anything but confident that they would be gratified, and therefore was prudently desirous that other competitors, though kept at a disadvantageous distance, should not be driven away altogether.

But if Mrs. Blessington entertained such fears, and pursued such a strategy, it must be because Miss Blessington herself had not made, and could not be induced to make, up her mind to accept her titled lover. In that case, Miss Blessington was wavering. He would speak to Miss Blessington herself. He had the opportunity now, and he seized it at once.

She began with the kindest expressions of regret at his recent defeat, but her condolence was of a very different kind from what her mother's had been. Hers was really meant to soothe and to encourage.

"But, after all," she said, when they had been talking a little time, and he had been

in vain watching for a favourable occasion for introducing the subject of which he was full, "I do not see why you should care, or, indeed, that you should want to go into Parliament at all. What better would you be for it? I do not think it would amuse you long, and it must be very dull to a man who is not ambitious."

"Nothing is dull," he answered, "that helps one to some very much desired end. You can understand that, I am sure."

"Easily. But what does it help you to? What end are you seeking?"

"I will tell you, if you will let me. I am not a particularly clever man, Miss Blessington, and I know it. I am a good sportsman, I have travelled a good deal, I have had a fair experience of the world, but I am not a book man. I could not aspire to be a prominent politician. All this I know as well as anybody. But I think I should vote right, and could be of use in that way in these upsetting days."

She was looking at him with eyes so

full of sweet compassion, of such beautiful toleration for his simplicity, that he almost thought at that moment she was fond of him. He felt encouraged by it. So dangerous is the unintentional flattery of a lovely woman, whose sole adulation consists in kindly listening!

“Even that little is something,” he went on. “But it would be everything if it only assisted me in what is now the one great ambition of my life. I know I cannot do much, but I wanted to show that I would do all in my power, in order to be less unworthy to obtain what I intend to strive for, with or without it—namely, you.”

She could not pretend not to understand him; and even had she been able to do so, she was far above all such artifices.

“Please, Mr. Fleetwood, to strive for nothing of the kind, either now or ever afterwards. I say this as your sincere friend.”

“Am I too late?” he asked.

“Too late for what?” she said, with surprise.

"Too late to win you. I hope I do not offend you. I will preserve your secret, if it is one; but out of kindness, confide it to me. Are you already engaged?"

"Certainly not," she said. "The moment that I am there will be no secret. The whole world will be welcome to know it. But, my dear Mr. Fleetwood, I must beg of you, in receiving this frank reply, to consider it quite as conclusive as if the reply had been precisely the opposite."

"I will not now pursue a subject," he said, "from which you as much as command me to desist. But I cannot accept it as a command, save for the moment. My whole existence is staked upon winning your love, and I will never abandon the attempt till you make it absolutely hopeless."

"I really wish to do so now," she replied. "In justice, in kindness, in mere friendship to you, I am bound to say this. Your wish is absolutely hopeless."

"You cannot make it so, as long as you

are free, and you cannot blame me for persevering. Of this at least be sure," he added, laying significant stress on his words, "I will appeal to no one but you for a decision."

"But, Mr. Fleetwood, I have already given it."

"Then I will appeal to no one but to you to aid me in reversing it."

He bowed and left her.

"Why should it be one's doom to inflict such pain and work such mischief?" she said to herself. "Here is a noble gentleman who has never done me wrong, and he is doing all sorts of foolish things on my account, and is perhaps miserable into the bargain. I wonder where Guinivere is."

Guinivere was not visible. But her mother was, and so now was Lord Rendover. And Chichester Fleetwood, when he next turned to get a glimpse of the enchantress whom he had just quitted, saw her making her way through the throng on the arm of his fortunate rival.

He quitted the grounds in all haste and drove home. Once there, he sat down and tried to review the position as calmly as he could; but the vexation which ever dogs the steps of men dependent for their happiness and even their judgments on the opinions of others, and under which he was peculiarly smarting at the present time, made it unlikely that he should arrive at a very wise conclusion. Besides, he was not quite so correct in some of his suppositions as he fancied himself to be.

He had, after his fashion, a high esteem for Miss Blessington, but he would have been quite at a loss to say in what she was superior to other girls, except that she was much more beautiful. All the grander part of her completely escaped his cognizance and observation. He took for granted that she would marry somebody or other; and also that the somebody or other would be the person who, not being absolutely repugnant to her, was most desired as a husband for her by her parents. He drew

this conclusion from a pretty long and pretty steady experience. He had heard of girls marrying men of their own unfettered and unbiassed choice, and against the views of their family; but such cases were very rare, and they were never spoken of except to be highly reprobated. He felt quite certain that a girl whom everybody spoke so warmly of as they did of Gertrude Blessington, would never do anything so monstrous and eccentric.

He was forced, in reviewing the position, and in assuming so much, to own that the assumption was strongly corroborated by what he was hearing on all sides and what he had himself witnessed to-day. Lord Rendover was unquestionably, in the estimation of the people among whom Chichester Fleetwood had his being, and therefore perforce in Fleetwood's own estimation, a man whom the parents of every girl in the world would do and ought to do their very utmost to induce her to accept as a suitor. It was, moreover, perfectly

clear that Mr. and Mrs. Blessington were acting in strict conformity with this fashionable creed; the former without any scruple or doubt as to the result, the second with precisely the same views, but with more caution and with somewhat of fear.

But this very fear of Mrs. Blessington's could arise from nothing but her knowledge of her daughter's hesitation. Hence there yet was time for Lord Rendover to be cut out. But he could be cut out only by a man who could present himself with better claims before the daughter, and with something like equal claims before the parents.

Miss Blessington's own words troubled him but little. He took them to mean little if anything more than that, as long as her parents persisted in wishing her to marry one man, she should never think of opposing them so far as to marry another. If once the squire and his wife could be got to look as favourably on his suit as they now were looking on Rendover's, he flattered himself that he would have quite as good a chance

with the young lady herself as Lord Rendover. Indeed, man-like, he flattered himself that he would have a better chance.

What would put him, as far as the parents were concerned, in as good or nearly as good a position as Lord Rendover? One thing, and one only: a large accession of fortune. Was it possible to obtain it?

He thought it was. Since his return to England with the considerable means which he had brought from the East, he had scrupulously abstained from any transactions of commerce, feeling how necessary it was that in assuming his proper and hereditary position of country gentleman, he should rigidly adopt the habits peculiar to it. For all that, he had never been able to destroy or even deaden his interest in those matters of commercial speculation with which he had once been so fortunately connected. Whilst withholding his hand from all further share in them, his eye had followed their movements, fluctuations, and chances with unflagging zest.

It so happened that, at this very moment, there was a chance for anybody to make a great coup, who chose to run the risk inherent in all such enterprises. He was thoroughly aware of this, and had been aware of it for some weeks, and he was also aware that the commercial opinion of the City was strongly divided as to what would be the real upshot of any such perilous speculations. Even before the Leverstoke election he had been tempted to consider the desirability of his, just for once, breaking through his rule, and trying his old luck. But firstly the dread of injuring his now assured status of country gentleman, and then the absorbing occupation of the electioneering contest suddenly thrust upon him, had compelled him to lay aside the idea.

Now the temptation rushed upon him with accumulated force. Here were the seven devils worse than the first. He had spent a terrible lump of money over the election, and he had pledged himself to spend a good—indeed, an indefinite—sum

more in petitioning against the return of his opponent. He had materially injured his income, and just at the very moment when his hope of success elsewhere lay in increasing it. But he *could* increase it now. The opportunity had by no means passed away. The risk was perhaps a little greater than before, but then the coup, if it turned out to be a wise one, would be all the more brilliant. It was clear that other men, men whose lives were devoted to such matters, were going in for it. He would do the same. At least he would see if he could not do the same. It was too late to do anything to-day. But to-morrow he would drive down to the City, and there make up his mind on the spot.

The old neck-or-nothing spirit was on him again. He was determined not to be beaten, for want of boldness. His vanity was leading him on either to destruction or triumph.

“D——n the fellow!” he said, “I would swear it was he who sprung that mine at

Leverstoke. Who else would do it? Ay, and who else could have done it so cleverly? But I'm sure she doesn't really care for him as yet. Not a bit. But that old Blessington—plague take him! And the cautious mother, who was so civil before! But only let me go into this thing, and let it turn up trumps, then we'll see how they will behave. I've known half a million made in a morning before to-day. I wish it were to-morrow. Where's the *Economist*? I'll read that article over again. But what's the use, after all? I know all about it. I have the thing at my fingers' ends."

CHAPTER XI.

THE UNDERHILL BALL.

It was only half-past nine in the evening, yet lights were burning in the principal bed-room and dressing-room of Jessamine Lodge. Mrs. Underhill, Atwell's step-mother, the town had long known, was going to give a ball, and the day for its taking place had at length arrived.

It had been a moot and much debated point whether Atwell and his wife should or should not be invited. There was no question about Atwell ; the difficulty regarded his wife. But he could not be invited without her. Some very much outraged and severe members of the great family of Underhill, Morris, and Underhill declared that he

could ; and they urged their arguments with all their might. The female members who took this view, were exceedingly fierce and obstinate. They disregarded every objection of etiquette, for which they had been ready to do battle all their lives ; and tossed to the winds every consideration of social decency, for which they had hitherto always seemed ready to go to the stake. But the other side, consisting of the more moderate, more calm, and more reasonable members, were too much for them. Their plausible excuses for omitting to ask Mrs. Atwell were clearly but just so much party sophistry ; and though Mrs. Underhill herself would have liked above all things to be convinced by them, she was forced to return to her original assertion, that she was very sorry to be obliged to ask the objectionable creature, but that nevertheless she must do so.

Of course Atwell and his wife, though well aware that they were in worse odour with "those confounded relations," as he

called them, than ever, had no idea that such a question had been debated. The invitation was sent and arrived. It arrived rather late, Godiva remarked. She knew of several people who had had theirs a week or ten days. It was evidently intended as a slight.

"Nonsense, Diva. They behave badly enough, all of them, Heaven knows, and I'm not the last to see it. Nor is my step-mother the least insolent of the lot. But you can't make anything out of the invitation coming late. One can't expect them to stand on such ceremony as that with us. Hang it! the ball's going to be given in my own father's house, and it would be a funny thing if we were not going, even with a verbal invitation."

"Of course we are going," she had answered him. "But I declare I have nothing to go in."

"Nothing to go in, my darling!" he exclaimed.

"Absolutely nothing. Why, what? Have I a single dress?"

Hereupon ensued a long conversation, in which there was a good deal of argument, some difference as to facts, but which, we may be sure, ended in poor, simple Atwell being partly routed and partly foiled into laying down his arms, and skilful Godiva won the victory.

This was some weeks back. The results of the victory now lay upon the bed, and Atwell was being called in to give an opinion upon its merits. He found it all that he invariably found anything she thought fit to wear; and after exhausting his small but forcible stock of adjectives of admiration, he concluded by saying that only she could do it justice, and that it would never look its best till she had put it on.

"What did it cost, Diva? An awful lot, I expect."

"Well, guess. Remember, that's lace, you know."

"Is it? You don't say so. Well, eight guineas."

“Eight guineas! Why, Atwell, it would have cost eight guineas, without any of the trimming at all.”

“Well; ten, twelve? More! How much more?”

“I feared you’d be a little cross. I don’t think it will be more than fifteen; but it will be fully that.”

“Really you oughtn’t, Diva; upon my word, you oughtn’t. You know I haven’t got it to spend. I declare to you I haven’t.”

“But, Atwell dear, you said all your affairs were settled.”

“Settled! I said that I had got rid of all my scoundrelly Jew creditors, and that Percy Carryngton had managed to transfer my liabilities. You know how it was: I explained it all to you at the time. But I shall have to pay it all off—three thousand five hundred pounds—in five years.”

“But you said he was security for its being paid off.”

“So he is. But you don’t suppose I mean him to pay it!”

"I am sure you told me you never could pay it all yourself in the time, and I concluded he was to help you."

"I don't know anything about that, and we certainly have no right to calculate upon it. If he choses to help me for a time till I get made a partner, well and good. But all the more reason why we should be careful, and do as much as we can ourselves towards getting free of all these wretched things."

"So you will, in time," she said; "you are sure to do. And then you can pay everybody, and him too, if it's necessary. Now, doesn't it look lovely, Atwell?—doesn't it? Did you ever see anything lovelier in your life?"

"Never, upon my word, never; and I never saw you look so handsome."

And the brave, honest fellow felt a glow of delightful pride in his wife, which quite drove away for the moment all thought of the three thousand five hundred pounds, and how it was to be paid off. He thought only of his lovely Godiva, and how she was

going to his father's house, and how she would outshine all those "confounded relations," all those stuck-up mincing creatures who affected to patronize her, and how she would be admired by everybody, and be the belle of the ball and the talk of the evening. It would be an immense gathering, and everybody would be there, and all eyes would be turned upon her and the lucky fellow who had got her.

He quite forgot to consider, that if his theory was correct, her accomplishing all the above wonderful things in his father's house would only tend all the more to alienate from her the modicum of good will that yet lingered in the breasts of those same relations, and thereby move still further away his chance of being admitted into the firm, and so of bringing his affairs finally into order. This beautiful wife was his worst foe, and he prized her as the apple of his eye.

The ball-room, and indeed all the other apartments, were well filled by the time they

arrived; nevertheless Godiva's entry did not fail to make a very considerable stir, and attract a large amount of attention. She received the somewhat stately salutations of the lady of the house with a bright cordiality that would have led mere bystanders to suppose that not a being on earth could dislike or be disliked by her, and she dispensed the same glad sparkling smiles among all the other members of the vast Underhill and Morris community.

A very large portion of the fashionable London world were present, inasmuch as everything had been done not only by the hostess, but by all the women in any way connected with the famous house, to make this gathering a sort of demonstration of the social power and celebrity attained by Underhill, Morris, and Underhill. It was an understood thing amongst them that one of the principal partners should do this once every season, and this year it was the turn of Atwell's father to do it. Nothing had been spared either in the way of money or

influence to make it one of the most brilliant and notorious entertainments of the year.

To a very large number of those who were present, Godiva was therefore unknown even by sight; and there was a good deal of inquiry afloat in the rooms, both among dowagers and young girls, as to who she was. Those who knew, told; and poor Atwell's wild oats again cropped up, no doubt, for their edification. But this made Godiva's entry partake still more of the nature of a triumph, and both she and her husband walked delightedly amongst a crowd of people, all of whom were staring, if few of them were saluting.

But there was one person who still belonged to the world of fashion, and cut a distinguished figure in it, who knew her, and judging by the way in which they greeted each other, seemed to know her very intimately.

This was Percy Carryngton. He was the first who offered her his arm, and after a

brief and unceremonious, but evidently most friendly greeting with her husband, led her away.

"So you have given us up altogether, Mr. Carryngton?" she began.

Not a shade of melancholy, not a sign of regret was visible on her face as she said this. She contrived to reproach him without letting others suspect for a moment that she had anything to reproach him for. She looked the happiest woman in the room; and I question if any other, except Gertrude Blessington, could pretend to surpass her in beauty.

"Now, that is too bad," he answered; "if you knew that I could easily defend myself, you might be excused for attacking me. But when there is a semblance of truth in what you say, it is not generous to be down upon me in that way. You do not in the least believe that I am giving you up at all, let alone altogether."

"But you own it is ever so long since we saw you."

"So it is ; but I have been bothered out of my life. I declare I have not been able to call my time my own, or when I could call it my own, I was in such an indifferent frame of mind that I did not choose to pay you the bad compliment of venting my blue devils on you and Atwell."

"Why, what has been the matter? You are not looking your best, I must say ; but that I attribute to your not having seen me for so long a time. It is a just punishment of Heaven!"

"That must be it," he said, stupidly ; manifestly he was not in great force. "But I really mean what I say ; yet I assure you I have been thinking of you both very often."

"What is it?—tell me," she said in a sweet winning undertone, and slightly clinging to his arm as she did so.

"Nothing," he said, "at least, nothing that I can tell you here. Never mind. It—perhaps it is the last time you will ever see me in a London ball-room or any other place of the kind."

"Why, what has happened? But I must not ask you, you say. Well, I wont; but I think it is rather hard that when you are low-spirited and bothered, you should not only stay away from those who"—she bent her head slightly over her bouquet of choice flowers—"who love you, you know, best—not only stay away from them, but give it as the very reason for your doing so."

"Would you have me be selfish?" he asked.

"But that is what I call being selfish; to prevent me from the pleasure of trying at least to cheer you up. *Dó* come to-morrow, any day, all days. I used to be able to make you comfortable at the Lodge. I do not want to know your secrets; but I should like to console you."

It was impossible for any man to have this woman on his arm, and prevent her from leading all the world to suppose, if she so wished it, that he was at that very moment making love to her, or at some previous time had done so. Many a curious

eye had watched them during this conversation, and many a pretty thing was being said in consequence. Carryngton was really unconscious of it; but she invariably not only had her triumph, but she read it on the faces of lookers-on as distinctly as they read it upon hers.

"She's very handsome," said one joyful, but respectable mother of children; "very handsome indeed. But she's about the most audacious flirt I ever saw. Is her husband in the room?"

"Oh dear, yes. Did you not see them come in together? He and young Carryngton, I am told, are great friends."

"Um!" said another; "no wonder Carryngton does not marry; the reason's plain enough now. But I thought all the Underhills were such proper people?"

"So they are," said a third old lady who knew everything under the sun that was not worth knowing, and knew that wrongly. "But don't you know that Atwell Underhill has always been a black sheep,

gambled, got into debt, ran away to the Sandwich Islands or somewhere, came home, was given some sort of low situation in the firm, married very oddly, and that's the woman."

"Oh, that's the woman, is it?" said another dowager, pretending to be very wise and know all about it. "Oh, indeed. Well, all I can say is, French manners are coming in very fast."

"Did you ever see anything like her?" one of Atwell's "confounded relations" was at the same time asking another.

"Never in my life. Odious, isn't she?"

"Abominable. I wonder at Mr. Carryngton going about with her as he does. I thought he had better taste."

"Oh, men are all the same. It's only necessary to be just what she is, to fool them. What do you think of her dress?"

"Vulgar in the extreme. It doesn't fit her, to begin with."

"And so *décolletée*!"

"Ugh! Don't mention it." And these

two amiable young people cast about them for their lagging partners.

Meanwhile Godiva still retained hold of Carrygnton, who noticed with some surprise that Lord Rendover seemed to be making towards them. He had not seen his cousin to do more than nod to, since the day, now some weeks ago, when he sent his written refusal to stand for Leverstoke. Rendover had previously been in the habit of leaving notes at his club or sending them to his rooms, to the effect, "Dine with me to-day to meet so-and-so," or "Look in to dinner this evening; I expect such a person." But there had been no such written messages of late, and it had not happened that they had met anywhere where it was absolutely requisite that they should stop and converse. He knew that Rendover was not acquainted with Mrs. Atwell Underhill, and so he thought it strange that he should choose this occasion for accosting him. Here, however, was Rendover at his side.

"How are you, Percy? Present me, will you?"

"Will you allow me to introduce Lord Rendover, of whom you have often heard me speak?"

And in a moment more, Percy had left the two new acquaintances together. He had asked nobody to dance as yet, and he was looking out for a face whose eye he had caught more than once during the last twenty minutes or so, but which he could not for his life find now. He felt thirsty. He would have some claret-cup. On his way he met Chichester Fleetwood, who passed his arm through Carryngton's, and went with him. Along the refreshment buffet was the usual string of idlers.

"Well, Fleetwood, how goes the petition? Do you intend to persevere?"

"To be sure I do. What on earth should I withdraw it for?"

"You have not the shadow of a chance of getting the seat. It is perfectly clear that you bribed just as much as they did."

"It was a case of pull beggar, pull devil, as far as I can see," said another, "and the other fellows pulled the hardest."

"Not only the hardest," said a third, "but the most discreetly. I tell you what, Fleetwood, corruption is being brought home much more distinctly to your side than to theirs. That's what everybody was saying in Westminster Hall to-day."

"Who the deuce cares?" said Fleetwood, not so much angrily as gaily and recklessly. "I have not won the seat, and I shall not win it this time: I know that well enough. But I'm not going to let them keep it. And I'll have it yet, you'll see, all of you." And he tossed off a tumbler of iced Moselle. "You don't suppose I am to be beaten in that way. Ha, ha!"

"Upon my soul, I think he has lost his head," said one of the previous speakers, as Fleetwood moved away. "He must have spent a fortune over that election."

"And he must be spending another over the petition."

"Sheer madness. He'll ruin himself to a certainty, for he can't be a very rich man," added another, wiping and reorganizing his long fair moustaches.

Carryngton had remained perfectly silent. He would have liked to have been able to warn Fleetwood and to save him. But in the first place his tongue was tied; and in the second, even had it been loosed it would probably have wagged its warnings in vain. He saw Fleetwood turn away, and the rest of the group one by one follow, till now he found himself with Grantley Morris, the only person still remaining.

"Much those fellows know of what they talk so glibly," said Grantley Morris. He was the most important, and perhaps the cleverest of the younger members of the great firm, and by virtue of his marriage with Lord Brakecliffe's daughter, had become still more important and was deemed still cleverer. He was not at all a bad fellow, but he had a difficult part to play, that of a thorough man of business,

yet with distinct obligations of suit and service to the world of society and fashion.

"Much they know!" he said. "Chichester Fleetwood has no more lost his head than you or I have; and he has got one to lose, which is more than can be said of them. Fleetwood has not had the advantages of making a fortune for himself in vain. I tell you what, Carryngton, between you and me—for it's just as well not to talk about these things till they're done—it is exceedingly likely that, in a very few weeks—it may be days—he'll be one of the richest commoners—out of business, of course—in the country."

"Why, how can that be?" asked Carryngton, with surprise.

"Say nothing about it. But we, as a matter of course, in our position, get wind of all these things; and I know that he has gone in for a heavy speculation in silk, which I wanted our people to go in for, but they wouldn't. They begin to see that I was right now, but it's too late to do it.

Fleetwood, however, has done the trick, as all the world will know before long."

"Are you sure that he will be successful?" Percy asked.

"Sure! No, not perfectly sure. One never can be absolutely sure in such matters. But, at any rate, so far sure, that there is scarcely a merchant in the City of London who wouldn't be in for Fleetwood's speculation, if he could. He knows what he's about a great deal better than those fellows think for."

It is difficult to say with what feelings precisely Carryngton heard this bit of commercial news. He tried to put it out of his head, and along with it all the thoughts with which it was associated. What did it matter to him whether Chichester Fleetwood's silk turned into gold or into a hempen rope? Whoever won, *he* had lost. Why should he ask himself who was likely to marry Gertrude Blessington, seeing that *he* assuredly would not. Yet he could not help feeling as though he would have liked

to throttle everybody who was thus vulgarly playing for her.

Lord Rendover and Mrs. Atwell Underhill were still together, and had meanwhile been most fluently discoursing. Rendover's only reason—a strong enough one, surely—for being introduced to her, was the desire of knowing a handsome woman; but he heard from her one or two things which, it seemed to him, still further rewarded him for his good taste.

“And my cousin Percy is a great ally of Mr. Underhill's, is he?”

“Yes, but of mine too. I beg you not to forget that,” she answered. “He is the dearest fellow in the world, and nobody must differ from that opinion, when they talk of him to me.”

“I am surely the last person in the world to do so.”

“I should think so, from what I have heard him say. I know how kind you have been to him. My husband knew him before you did. They once travelled to-

gether in the Tyrol, when Mr. Carryngton was little more than a boy."

"I don't think he will ever do anything," said Rendover. "He has plenty in him, but you women spoil him; and I should imagine, Mrs. Underhill, that you are the chief offender," he added, gallantly. "Indeed, with such a temptation, I wonder we ever see anything of him at all. Were I in his place, I should certainly be lost to public sight altogether."

"Why should he do anything?" she said. "There is no necessity, and I always tell him so. I hate people who do anything. To spoil, and to be spoiled, is the best occupation in the world."

"Of course you see a great deal of him. Lucky fellow!"

"Yes, we do, and never too much. Just of late, we have not perhaps seen quite so much of him. I think it must be, Lord Rendover, because you have got hold of him, and are trying to make him work."

"I should never succeed, if I tried. I don't think he cares for it."

"Again I say, why should he? I hope he never will. But I am not so sure about his not doing something still more foolish."

"And what can that be?"

"Marry. I do my best to warn him; but I feel sure he will fall into the trap."

"What trap? Is anybody laying a trap for him?"

"I shall know better this evening, a little later. I have never seen them together as yet, though I have often heard him speak of her."

"Of whom?" asked Rendover, with a prescience of the coming answer.

"Of Beauty Blessington, as I believe you all call her."

It must be borne in mind, as has been already stated, that Godiva was virtually quite out of the world in which she found herself to-night, and was therefore quite

ignorant of the general rumour that Gertrude would, before the end of the season, be proclaimed as the future Lady Rendover. She little guessed the importance of her babble, and the influence it was having upon the man who was listening to her. But we may safely say that had she known it, she would have done precisely what she was doing.

“But what makes you think he wants to marry her?” he asked.

“The way he always mentions her. I was wrong; I once did see them together, though only in a box at the theatre. And though we women cannot always give convincing reasons for our belief in such matters, we generally turn out to be right, all the same.”

“So you do. And I should have great faith in *your* instincts.”

“You flatter me. But, as I said, I shall know more a little later.”

At that moment up came Atwell. He wanted to introduce somebody to his wife;

and after being himself presented by her to Lord Rendover, he gave her his arm and led her away.

“What will Gertrude say of Lord Rendover’s attentions to that woman? Mrs. Atwell Underhill, is she not?” old Lady Brakecliffe was asking of Mrs. Blessington.

Their drive together in the Park will perhaps be remembered, and their conversation not yet forgotten. But matters had altered since then, and Lady Brakecliffe, sensible woman as she was, had accepted the situation and the supposed change of suitors for Miss Blessington, just as all the rest of the world had done.

“She will say nothing, I am sure,” said Mrs. Blessington. “Gertrude is the least jealous girl in the world. Besides, she would have no right ; at least, not as yet.”

“Then he has not formally proposed to her? I thought he had.”

“No, certainly not. I should wish you, Lady Brakecliffe, to contradict it on every

possible occasion. Gertrude is a girl of very great independence; and though there is no one in England who might not be proud of the attention which he has paid her, and of the wish, which I need not hesitate to say to you I know he has, to make her his wife, I think he is acting most wisely in delaying still longer any distinct proposal to her."

"And she really does not care for Chichester Fleetwood? I ask it, as an old friend, you know. Darling Gertrude! I am so much attached to her, and so anxious that she should do well. I suppose she never did care for him?"

"I have not the least reason to suppose so," answered Mrs. Blessington, cautiously, and then the dialogue ended. For two personages, as portly as themselves, came to lead them respectively in to supper.

"Going to Goodwood, Rendover?" asked a well-known aide-de-camp, who overtopped by the head the half-a-dozen men among whom he stood, though Rendover and

Chichester Fleetwood, both tall men, were two of the group.

"Of course. Have got a seat on my drag for you, if you like."

"Thanks. If I can manage it, I'll accept. Have you made your book, and whom are you backing?"

"Rendover never bets," said Fleetwood. "He's too prudent a hand for that. He leaves that to us rash scatterbrains."

"I don't usually bet," said Rendover, easily, "but I don't mind putting on my money this time, if I can find anybody to make it worth my while. I feel so certain that Philister wont win."

"He'll win to a certainty," said Fleetwood.

"Of course he will. That he will. The race is already won," echoed a chorus of agreeing voices.

"Very well," said Rendover, coolly. "I may be wrong, but that's my opinion, and I'm quite ready to back it, if, as I said, I can find anybody who will make it worth

my while. As Fleetwood said, I'm not a betting-man, and I don't make a book. I've got no other bet, and I shall not make any. But I'll give the odds in ten thousands against Philister's winning."

"I'll take you, Rendover," said Fleetwood. "It's eight to five."

"It's nine to five," said the aide-de-camp. "At least, it was this afternoon, at the Corner."

"Nine to five be it then," said Rendover.

"Done!" said Fleetwood. "That will pay all my election and petition expenses, Rendover, and a good deal over," he added, with a significant look, which, however, had no more effect on Rendover's face than on the ice he was eating.

"It will, when you have got it," he answered.

"Which he assuredly will," said one man.

"First rash thing I ever knew Rendover do," said another.

"I believe he hates Fleetwood, and would

like to ruin him if he could. That's the secret of it."

"Nonsense. Rendover hates nobody. It isn't in him either to love or hate. You might as well talk of this tumbler hating."

About half-an-hour later, Carryngton had just made up his mind to go, and was looking about him for the direction of the cloak-room, when he heard Miss Blessington's voice behind him, and as it seemed to him, calling to him by name. He turned, and beheld her on Lord Rendover's arm, and Chichester Fleetwood close by.

"Will you kindly give me your arm, Mr. Carryngton," she said, withdrawing hers almost forcibly from Lord Rendover's.

Of course he did as he was requested.

"I cannot allow myself to be the subject of such contention," she said, with dignity, to both of them, and passed on with Carryngton.

"What was it all about?" he said.

"They both claimed me for the next

lancers, and in a manner that does not agree with my ideas of convenience, to say the least of it. I am so glad I saw you just in time."

"Were they very angry, and fierce, and that sort of thing?"

"No, it will be nothing. But I cannot allow men to wrangle about me in a ball-room, or anywhere where I am present."

"Quite right," he said. "But you always are."

"And what are you going to do with me, now that I have rashly committed myself to your charge? Take me back to mamma?"

He saw that she was smiling, whilst he, for his life, even with her upon his arm, could not induce a really genuine gleam of sunshine to break upon his serious face.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Because you have seemed very anxious, on two occasions this evening, to get rid of me as soon as ever you had done all that was absolutely required of you."

He had waltzed with her twice, that

night, and each time as though he was doing so in order to give vent to his feelings in giddy, rapid motion, rather than for the sake of the pleasure which he ordinarily took in dancing with her. Never before had he paused for breath or conversation so seldom or so briefly, and certainly never before had it ever occurred to her to be surrendered by him so easily at the end of it. She felt sure that he was troubled in mind, and this was her delicate way of approaching his troubles. The tone of her voice was too kind for him to be able to construe her words literally.

“ You know—or if you do not know, I can assure you that it is so—that far from wanting to get rid of you, I would rather be with you for ten minutes than—well, I will make no comparisons; none of them would satisfy me. But I am out of spirits, and temper, and hope, and everything. Matters are drawing to a close.”

“ Has anything more happened?” she inquired, anxiously.

"Nothing," he answered; "but that nothing is significant enough. The present state of things cannot last. After writing the letter which I told you about, I have not heard a word from him, and I spoke to him this evening almost for the first time since."

"And what are you going to do? Have you any plans?"

"None. What am I to do? There is nothing else for it, as far as I can see, but throwing everything up here, and going back to the old southern life. You don't know how pleasant it is, living on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, and doing nothing."

"Now, why do you talk like that to me?" she said, seriously and reprovngly. "You know you do not mean what you say; and where is the use of affecting a cynicism which you could not act for half-an-hour, in my presence or anybody else's? It is not worthy of you, Mr. Carryngton, indeed it is not."

“Don’t be hard with me, to-night,” he said, imploringly. “I have only your kind words to turn to. But what, in all sobriety, is there for a man in my position, and with my antecedents, to do in this country? With such a future as will now probably be mine, any form of public life is quite out of the question. Look at Chichester Fleetwood. They say he spent twenty thousand pounds at Lever-stoke——”

“You don’t say so!” she exclaimed, with truly feminine horror.

“Every shilling of it, they say, and yet he did not win. And now he is spending ever so much more. It is money, nothing but money, that starts a man now-a-days, and keeps him going when he is started. I have not got it, and I never shall have it now, and I might just as well abandon the field.”

“But there are other occupations, surely, and in abundance?”

“What, for instance?” he asked.

She had, as we know, a great fund of nobleness, and a firm belief that a man thoroughly in earnest, might cut himself a road somewhere. But it was not to be expected that she had any clear practical notion of where he was to begin. She only felt that, if she were a man, or even remaining a woman, no persons or circumstances on earth could so bring her to bay that she would not be able to break through in one way or another. As she did not answer his question—and he had not expected that she would be able to do so—he went on.

“What, for instance? Government clerkships or secretaryships, or any other form of kill-time drudgery from ten till four, tempered by Pall Mall, Piccadilly, and the Park afterwards. I may be wrong; but I think that *eau sucrée*, and cigars, and sunshine at Monaco, are quite as noble occupations as any of those. No! I have made a monstrous mistake, and I must pay the penalty. I shall only make it worse by staying here. Encourage me to go, I beg

of you. Let me carry away with me one delightful remembrance, before it be too late—a remembrance to mingle with the blue frail smoke of my economical Vevay, with the smell of the lemon groves, with the indolent plash of the tideless sea—the remembrance of one dear friend, beautiful but never capricious, kind but frank, noble but compassionate, the remembrance, my dear Miss Blessington, of you. Let me go, I say. Nay, do more. Pronounce my exile. Tell me that I must, in honour, give up the irksome price of dependence, resume my liberty, and live on my memories.”

Her bosom heaved, but gently; much as in its less ruffled mood, might heave that tideless sea of which he had spoken. There was silence awhile between them, and then at last she said—

“No, you must not renounce—at least, not in the direction of which you speak. If I am still to be your counsellor, as I am delighted to hear that I am still esteemed

your friend, you will hold your ground, and make that ground serve your bidding. I will never advise exile or abandonment. There are things and persons you should, perhaps, strive to renounce; but they are rather inherited and cultivated love of ease, contempt for common energies, and disbelief in daily drudgery. Give these up as soon as ever you like. I hope," she went on, smiling sweetly, "that I may mingle in your thoughts, but on no Sybaritic southern shore. Get something to do—something, whatever it is—here, here in England, and then come and tell your friend that you have done so."

"You spoke of things and persons whom I ought to renounce," he said to her, as though that remark of hers had gone home to him the most. "You have told me the things, but who are the persons?"

"Did I say so? Well, yes, I did. I don't see why I should shrink from telling you, since it is all one and the same renunciation—renunciation of that general love

of ease, and of an adulation which is all the more insidious because it is less definite and apparent. Why,"—and here her voice, for the first time, had in it a touch of anger—"why do you allow yourself to be influenced so much by a woman with whom I saw you so long this evening?"

"You mean Mrs. Atwell Underhill?" he said.

"I do. I have no desire to say anything about her, except that something more than my instincts make me averse to her. I wish to think and to speak only of the effect which her society has, and necessarily must have upon *you*. Forgive my extreme outspokenness, but you are spoiled by doing nothing and by being enabled and encouraged to do it pleasantly. Even now, perhaps, you are going to pay the penalty. But of this I am sure, that the longer the penalty is delayed, the heavier it will be. Accept it, positively take it upon yourself, now, rather than wait for it to force itself upon you then. It will be easier, I assure

you. Regard all people as your natural enemies who either actively or passively help you to be idle. You really are too good, I feel convinced, both in head and heart, for such a life. Take hold of yourself, wrestle with yourself, and from your poorer, weaker, spoiled self, liberate your better, braver, true self. It merely requires determination."

As she spoke, it seemed to him as if his conscience had suddenly got an articulate voice and was addressing him aloud through her. "Her voice was as the voice of his own soul, heard in the calm of thought." These words of Shelley rushed upon him, and all that he could find to say was simply—

"Go on."

"I have said all," she said; "the rest remains with you."

Not a word from either of them that could raise the question what were the real relations between her and Lord Rendover. He felt that his tongue was completely tied,

and she avoided the subject as entirely as he did. Everything that she had said to him to-night, was consistent with her engaging herself to-morrow to his cousin. He felt this, and the feeling left him only all the more unable to accept with cheerfulness the path that she so distinctly marked out for him, that of undistinguished labour.

“I will think of what you have said. I always do; indeed, I fear I think of very little else. Supposing I particularly want to see you very shortly, where shall I best find you?”

“I shall be staying with Guinivere the whole of next week. Now take me to mamma, for I am sure she wants to go.”

He did so. Lord Rendover was standing by Mrs. Blessington's side, and as Percy bowed and turned away, he saw Rendover give her his arm, preparatory to taking her to her carriage.

“And will she really marry him?” he asked himself, with a sigh. “I suppose she will. Is it not always so?”

The ball-room was nearly as full as ever, but it had lost its meaning for Carryngton. Its soul, its essence had departed. He felt angry with the dancers—the gyrating fools; with the musicians—confound their row; with the people who seemed to jostle him—hang their impudence; with himself, with everybody. Was there ever such a detestable, hot, dusty, purposeless crush? He would go.

Rendover, after seeing Miss Blessington into her carriage, had returned to the ball-room. He had evidently come back on purpose to look for somebody. At last he had found her. It was Godiva.

“You surely are not going?” he said.

“We are indeed.”

“May I offer you my arm to your carriage?”

She took it; and Atwell followed with one or two other men who, like himself, had to rise betimes and prudently thought of what could not strictly be called the morrow, seeing that it was already half-past two.

"I hope I may have the pleasure of calling at Jessamine Lodge."

"Certainly; I am sure we shall be very glad to see you."

"And what did you make of your later observations, this evening?" he asked her in a light bantering tone, as though for talk's sake, and as if he could have no earthly interest in the reply.

"About Mr. Carryngton and Miss Blessington, do you mean?"

"Yes. Are you not satisfied, by what you saw to-night, that you have been entirely wrong for once?"

"Quite the opposite. If I am any judge, they are desperately in love with each other, and she still more with him than he with her."

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